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IMAGINATION

STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

MARCH, 1955

35¢

HIGHWAYS IN HIDING

by George O. Smith



Introducing the

AUTHOR



★
George O. Smith
★

WHEN William Hamling proposed that I turn out this thumbnail sketch of myself, my first thought was that any guy who has been cluttering up the science fiction magazines for twelve long years hardly needs any introduction. But William hastily pointed out that while a million or more words speaks for itself, not a word of them tell much about the man who did the deed. At this I indulged in some higher mathematics and came up with a grand average of about a hundred thousand words per year since 1942, which is no great shakes for any writer. So maybe a word of explanation is in order.

I shall now enter the competition for the Grand Prize by completing the statement, "I write Science

Fiction because—" in twenty-five words or more. But first, a Word from your Correspondent!

By the time you read this, I shall be shoving the age of Forty-Four hard and close. This puts me a solid twenty years in the electronics engineering field, with some years before that of amateur interest. I was among those kids who wound doorbell wire around an Oatmeal Box back in the mid-Twenties; and who listened to the famous Dempsey-Tunney "Long Count" heavyweight battle on a radio set of my own build. Atoms were still indivisible when I first became intrigued with the notion of science, and the proposal of the "Expanding Universe" was still a new idea. The 100 Inch Telescope

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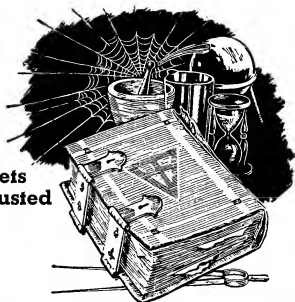
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SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA, U. S. A.

The Editorial

One of the regular departments in *Madge* is our *Science Fiction Library*, in which each month Henry Bott reviews one or more of the current crop of science fiction books. This department renders a service to the reader in that it provides a critical review — complimentary or otherwise — upon which a reader may base his decision to purchase and read the books reviewed. From the book publisher's and author's position it provides free publicity for their wares.

Those who review books are necessarily placed in a unique position; they are applauded by some, denounced by others — depending upon the opinions of the person who agrees or disagrees with the reviewer. For this reason reviewers of science fiction books should be chosen with an eye toward their background and/or qualifications.

In *Madge's* case, Henry Bott was selected because your editors believe him to be a highly qualified science fiction critic. His background covers some nineteen years as reader, writer, and editor in the field. Coupled with this is his academic background with a mathematics major and his current position as Head of the Technical Writing Section, of one of our

country's major scientific equipment corporations. From technical and literary aspects Mr. Bott fills our book of qualifications for a science fiction critic-reviewer.

We have elaborated in this regard because one science fiction writer who has had several of his books reviewed by Mr. Bott — unfavorably — has felt piqued to the point of first questioning the identity of our reviewer in correspondence to this office, and later with a public protest of the reviews he has "suffered" in one of science fiction fandom's publications, *Peon*. The writer in question is Isaac Asimov.

In his public protest Mr. Asimov accuses Henry Bott (referring to him as "The Nameless One") of indulging in personal insult, and not being bound to accuracy and fact. Mr. Asimov further berates Mr. Bott as being a critic who substitutes invective for reasoning and personalities for analysis. Mr. Asimov also includes in his protest the lectural point that a reviewer ought not to imply that *no one* likes the book being reviewed, especially since the record indicates that thousands of copies were sold.

For those interested in reading the full account of Mr.

Asimov's protest, we feel sure copies can be obtained by writing to the editor of *Peon*, Charles Lee Riddle, 108 Dunham St., Norwich Connecticut. Listed price of the publication is 10 cents.

It is not our intention to attempt to prove that any book review given in our pages is necessarily gospel word on the subject, inasmuch as opinions differ. We do however take exception to a writer's attempts to nullify the effect (in his mind) of an unfavorable review by condemning the reviewer with untrue remarks.

Further, any reply to Mr. Asimov by Mr. Bott, we feel, should be made in the pages of this magazine, the source of Mr. Asimov's ire. We also extend to Mr. Asimov, if he should so desire, the opportunity to reply in the issue immediately following this one. Forthwith we present Henry Bott's open letter to Mr. Asimov:

I am grieved that Mr. Asimov is perturbed about my dislike of his books. Ordinarily this would not disturb me greatly; a natural rancor must exist between author and critic.

Mr. Asimov takes me to task, as the "Nameless One" for identifying the author with the book, and criticizing the former, not the latter. This accusation prompts me to reply to his criticism of a critic.

I do not know Mr. Asimov. I know he has written numerous books. I have heard they have sold well. I know that many critics have praised his books.

I do not dislike Mr. Asimov. I have read most of his books. I do not like his books. I do not think they are well-written, interesting, or worth bothering about.

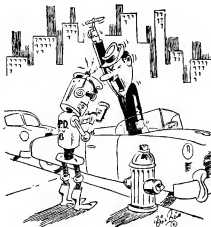
As a critic it is my privilege to say so.

I do say so.

Mr. Asimov is determined to force me to admit that his books are "good" even though we probably do not even agree on a definition for "good".

Mr. Asimov, if the criterion of quality is necessarily measured by the number of sales, comic books would be "good", the Spillane material would be great, and the vast majority of paperbacks would be magnificent. However, I do not concede that the interests or purchases of ten million morons indicates that makes those interests or purchases "good".

(Concluded on Page 59)



"I'll have you SCRAPPED for this!"

Highways In Hiding

by

George O. Smith

In a world of espers and telepaths, road signs seemed a bit archaic. And yet they offered a clue to the grim puzzle of Mekstrom's disease!

(Four-Part Serial — Part 1)

CATHERINE opened her apartment door with an amused smile. For a moment I would have been willing to swap my extrasensory perception for the ability of a telepath just to find out whether she was smiling at me or with me. But then she was in my arms and I found more pleasant things to think about.

This was it and I knew it. This was what I wanted. Not for a one-night stand but for a lifetime, because whatever chemistry it was that made one woman more desirable than another, Catherine had all of it for me. And from the way we clicked off, I knew that she was mine as much as I was hers.

It had been fast. I first saw Catherine a couple of months ear-

lier, sitting on a divan in the corner of a living room where a noisy mob of characters were consuming cocktails and swapping lies. Something about her caught my attention and within a minute we were also swapping the standard collection of little white lies that men and women tell each other at the first meeting. Five minutes later I was telling her the truth. An hour later I was composing a pleasant daydream of scooping her up into my arms and carrying her across a threshold. It had happened that fast, but the final section was yet to come.

Catherine stirred in my arms and leaned back to look me in the eye. "The answer is yes, Steve," she whispered. "Any time. Tonight."



I blinked.

She laughed happily and that smile came back. "You and your esper," she said. "So darned superior. It's been fun, Steve, and it will probably turn into a long-term family joke. But we'll have fun with it, won't we?"

I held her off by a foot or so and shook her gently. "You've been holding out on me," I glowered falsely. "You're a telepath!"

She nodded. "I am, and it's been fun. But I can't carry it on any more. Not if we're going to be married. I wouldn't want to start marriage with anything like that concealed."

I grinned down at her and said, "I think I've been carefully steered."

"Sure you were," she admitted shamelessly. "A man comes to love and a woman makes him stay to marry. But leading you on, Steve, sort of reminds me of two large snowballs rolling down a steep hill. No brakes. Me too!"

I flustered a bit. Love is a peculiar mixture of pure delight and vulgar ecstasy, and it is also a situation where man and woman strive to become as close to a single entity as possible while trying to preserve some modicum of personal, private integrity. I'd espied her apartment on our first date like a burglar digging for the

silver or a detective seeking clues. There had been a bunch of letters tied with a blue ribbon in the top drawer of her dresser, a book with a rather sentimental inscription on the flyleaf (one of those things that would have been called pornography if it had not been written in high grade poetry) and in the bottom dresser drawer there was a fine, honeymoon type nightgown still wrapped in its original celloclear wrapper. On our second date the letters had been removed, the book was gone and at the present time the honeymoon nightgown was packed in a travelling bag along with some more practical clothing.

Oh yes, love is sweet but it gets sweetly vulgar, especially when an esper like Steve Cornell doesn't know that the object of his desire is a mind reader.

CATHERINE came back into my arms for another kiss. "Don't fret, Steve," she said softly. "I like your mind."

I grinned. "My mind is red-faced."

"You should see mine," she laughed. "And I'm a bit sorry you can't."

That floored me completely, but Catherine went on happily, "So if you're going to use that license you've been carrying around in

your wallet for a couple of weeks, let's do it tonight."

I looked down at her, wondering. She laughed at me. "I don't need a sense of perception to find out things about you, Steve. All I have to do is look in your mind and eventually you think about it. And I do want to be carried across the threshold, shaking rice out of my hair. I've even packed some rice, in case you didn't dig my suitcase beyond the nightgown."

I hadn't, but it was all right.

"How long, Steve?" she pleaded.

"Stay with me and you'll find out as soon as I do," I told her. She sat close to me while I made a few long distance telephone calls. When I put the telephone down for the last time she leaned against me softly and said:

"An hour and a quarter of hard driving, ten minutes for the ceremony, then another twenty minutes to the honeymoon suite." Her voice thickened. "I can wait—just about that long."

We kissed most thoroughly, and then I got her suitcase and we left the apartment.

Fighting the city traffic was not much fun, but once we hit the open road, everything was sweet sailing.

The highway was as smooth as satin, a white concrete ribbon that

made the tires sing happily as we wound along the road toward our emotional goal. Some roadway commissioner had a sense of rustic beauty; there were none of the billboards that hawk everything from brassieres to toilet paper to mar the scenery that lay in sharp relief in the bright moonlight. This road commissioner must have had a brother-in-law in the iron business, because the usual road sign of a hunk of iron pipe and a rectangle of white enamel had been replaced by stately pillars of iron; the signs were graceful shields of wrought iron that hung from a crane that was ornamented in curlicues.

Everything was perfect.

Catherine sat beside me, hip to hip and knee to knee, her shoulder pressing mine gently. Her head was back against the seat and her dark hair was loose in the wind. Her eyes were closed, but she was watching the road through my mind and my eyes, and when I saw the sign that said that we were only forty miles from our honeymoon suite, she wriggled against me gently and said, "Forty miles to heaven, Steve," just as if she'd read the sign herself.

A bit later we passed another one. "Who did that?" she asked. I hadn't particularly noticed that anybody had done anything and

thought-so in my mind.

"You didn't notice?" She chuckled. Her eyes were still closed; I espied her face to be sure, keeping my eyes on the road. She sighed happily and said, "It's wonderful to relax in the mind of someone I love and someone who loves me."

"What was that about that sign back there?"

"You know that little Boy Scout sort of gizmo in the middle of the ironwork, held in place by three spokes? Well, the upper-left hand spoke was missing."

I LAUGHED and espied back along the road and caught the broken sign just at it passed back out of my range. Catherine was right; she'd read in my mind what I hadn't noticed. I caught the ends of the broken spoke just barely enough to dig that they were broken.

"Some vandal with a twenty-two," I said. "A bum shot, as well. Couldn't hit that gizmo in the middle—"

A sense of perception is a very active thing, especially when the owner begins to face trouble. If I'd been driving normally, with normal attention on the road, I would have been aware of it long before I could see it. But I was still trying to dig through the distance back there, and by the time

that warning sense came up strong, I was heading headlong for a broken limb that lay across the road.

It was too close for me to do anything but to clamp hard on the steering wheel. Then we hit it. The wheels jerked and the car bucked and a front tire blew out with an ear-shattering roar. The car lurched and Catherine screamed, barely long enough to be heard over the screech of rubber, tortured along smooth concrete. We went careening along on two wheels as I fought to get the car back down.

Then I saw the brown and green of the countryside through the windshield instead of the bright concrete. We plunged nose down into a shallow ditch, then we leaped high like a scaled stone as the front wheels hit the other side. I found time to be thankful that the ditch was not deep and steep, otherwise we'd have—

And then we were flipping over and over and the crashing roar dinned in my ears and I heard my own voice shouting and Catherine whimpering as the earth and the sky flashed over and around in a jolting, slamming mangle of metal and wood and glass. Tons and tons pushed me down and I blacked out in a wave of pain.

I fought myself awake to feel a

wave of heat and saw a quick whooshing flare of fire. There was a cruel weight on my breastbone that began to crush the life out of me, and I went into that blackness again. The last I heard was a whimpering cry from Catherine and a helpless groan from my own throat.

Both sounded far, far away and I knew that I could never get out of that pinch in time to save either voice from the fire.

WHEN I came out of it I knew that I was no longer pinned down with a broken steering wheel and a couple of tons of automobile. I was floating on soft sheets with only a light blanket over me.

I hurt all over like a hundred and sixty pounds of sore boil. My right arm was numb and my left thigh was aching. Breathing felt like someone stabbing me with knives. My skull felt as though it had been scraped to the bone with a floor-sander. The skin of my face felt stretched tight and it tingled. My nose was working just enough to catalog that pungent odor that goes with hospitals, but the rest of my senses were still asleep . . . There was a bandage over my eyes and the place was as quiet as the grave. But I knew that I was not in a grave because

the place smelled of hospital.

I tried to use my esper, but like any highly critical sense, perception was one of the first to fail. I couldn't dig out more than a few inches to sense the white sheet and the light blanket over me.

Someone had hauled me out of the wreck before the fire got me; I wondered who had been the brave man and I hoped that he had enough on the ball to pull Catherine out of the mess before he got me.

At any rate I was out of it and apparently safe. I let the blackness come over me again because it cut the pain.

Light came the next time I awoke. Light and a voice saying:

"Steve Cornell. Steve, can you hear me?"

The voice was pleasant and soft and I tried to answer but no sound came out. I was trying to tell the man in the white hospital coat that I was all right, but to please tell me what happened to Catherine.

"Catherine is all right," he said.

This came as a shock to me. Most medicos are highgrade espers, not telepaths. Reading the mind of a patient is not very effective because the average patient has no real idea of what is wrong with him. An esper digs the trouble out without having his mind

all fogged up by some layman's opinion of what causes the ache and pain. I floated around with this idea like a ferryboat in a high fog with no radar until I remembered who I was and why I was there. Then I remembered Catherine. I tried to ask again but nothing came out.

"Don't try to talk, Steve. Just think it."

Catherine? I thought sharply.

"Catherine is all right."

Can I see her?

"Lord, no. You'd scare her half to death if she saw you like this."

How bad off am I?

"You're a mess. Broken ribs, compound fracture of the tibia, neatly busted humerus. Scars, mars abrasions, and post-accident shock. Burns mild. Not a trace of Mekstrom's Disease."

Mekstrom's Disease—?

"I always check for it. It's my specialty. Don't worry."

Okay. But how long have I been here?

"Eight days, Steve."

My God! Couldn't you do the usual fast job? I have to get out of here!

"Your guts were all wound up. That's what took the time. But suppose you tell me what happened?"

We were eloping, just like everybody does since Rhine made it

hard to find personal privacy.

"Then what happened?" he asked.

I ran it off like a tape recorder from my date with Catherine to the accident. He followed it and then said, "Tough, Steve. But you'll be all right."

Thanks, Doc—Doc—?

"Sorry. I forget that everybody is not a telepath. I'm James Thorndyke."

How did you get a doctor's degree without esper?

"I fooled 'em," he said. "Until they caught up with me. But I'll tell you my life and adventures tomorrow. Rest a bit, Steve. It'll do you a lot of good."

I WENT back to sleep again. Not a very good sleep, because something began to rattle around in my mind that I couldn't put a finger to. Something off-key.

It didn't come clear until I began to wake up again, and with this better clarity of mind, I found that I could extend my esper as far as the wall and through the door by a few inches. It was strictly hospital all right. As sterile as a vat of boiling sulfuric acid. Sere white and stainless steel as far as the esper could reach.

In the room as I came out of it was a nurse, rustling in starched

white.

I thought my distressing thought as hard as I could but the nurse went on bustling, as efficient as the proverbial sewing machine. I tried to speak, croaked once, and then paused to form my voice.

"Can—I see—How is—? Where is?" I stopped again, because the nurse was probably as esper as I was and required a full sentence to get the thought behind it. Only a telepath like the doctor could have followed my jumbled ideas. But the nurse was a good one. She tried:

"Mr. Cornell? You're awake!"

"Look—nurse—"

"Take it easy. I'm Miss Farrow. I'll get the doctor."

"No—wait. I've been here eight days—?"

"But you were badly hurt, you know."

"But the doctor. He said that she was here, too."

"Don't worry about it, Mr. Cornell."

"But he said that she was not badly hurt."

"She wasn't."

"Then why was—is—she here so long?"

Miss Farrow laughed cheerfully. "Your Christine is in fine shape. She is still here because she wouldn't leave until you were well out of danger. Now stop fret-

ting. You'll see her soon enough."

Her laugh was light but strained. It sounded off-key because it was as off-key as a ten-yard-wide strip of bald-faced perjury. She left in a hurry and I was able to esp her as far as outside the door, where she leaned back against the wood and began to cry. She was hating herself because she had blown her lines and she knew that I knew it

Catherine had never been called Christine!

And Catherine had never been in this hospital, because if she had been brought in with me, the nurse would have known the right name . . .

CHAPTER II

I WAS fighting my body upright when Doctor Thorndyke came running. "Easy, Steve," he said with a quiet gesture. He pushed me gently back down in the bed with hands that were as soft as a mother's, but as firm as the kind that tie bow knots in half-inch bars. "Easy," he repeated soothingly.

"Catherine?" I insisted pleadingly.

Thorndyke fingered the call button in some code or other before he answered me. "Steve," he said honestly, "you can't be kept in ignorance forever. We hoped it would be a little longer,

when you were stronger—”

“Stop beating around!” I yelled. At least it felt like I was yelling, but maybe it was only my mind yelling.

“Easy, Steve. You’ve had a rough time. Shock—” The door opened and a nurse came in with a hypo all loaded, its needle buried in a fluff of cotton. Thorndyke eyed it professionally and took it; the nurse faded quietly from the room. “Take it easy, Steve. This will—”

“No! Not until I know—”

“Easy,” he repeated. He held the needle up before my eyes. “Steve,” he said, “I don’t know whether you have enough esper training to dig the contents of this needle, but if you haven’t, will you please trust me? This contains a neurohypnotic. It won’t put you under. It will leave you as wide awake as you are now, but it will disconnect your running gear and keep you from blowing a fuse.” Then with a swift deftness that amazed me, the doctor slid the needle into my arm and let me have the full load.

I was feeling the excitement rise in me because it was obvious that something was patoo, but as I began to grasp that fact, I could also feel the stuff going to work. Within half a minute I was in a chilled-off frame of mind that was capable of recognizing the facts

but not caring much one way or the other.

When he saw the stuff taking hold, Thorndyke asked, “Steve, just who is Catherine?”

The shock almost cut through the drug. My mind whirled with all the things that Catherine was to me, and the doctor followed it every bit of the way.

“Steve, you’ve been under an accident shock. There was no Catherine with you. There was no one with you at all. Understand that and accept it. No one. You were alone. Do you understand?”

I shook my head. I sounded to myself like an actor reading the script of a play for the first time. I wanted to pound on the table and add vigor of physical violence to my hoarse voice, but all I could do was to reply in a calm voice:

“Catherine was with me. We were—” I let it trail off because Thorndyke knew very well what we were doing. We were eloping in the new definition of the word. Rhine Institute and its associated studies had changed a lot of customs; a couple intending to commit matrimony today were inclined to take off quietly and disappear from their usual haunts until they’d managed to get intimately acquainted with one another. Elopement was a means of finding some personal privacy.

We should have stayed at home

and faced the crude jokes that haven't changed since Pithecanthropus first discovered that sex was simultaneously fun and funny. But our mutual desire to find some privacy in this modern fish-bowl had put me in the hospital and Catherine—where—?

"Steve, listen to me!"

"Yeah?"

"I know you espers. You're sensitive, maybe more so than telepaths. More imagination—"

This was for the birds in my estimation. But among the customs that Rhine has changed was the old argument as to whether women or men were smarter. Now the big argument was whether espers or telepaths could get along better with the rest of the world.

THORNDYKE laughed at my objections and went on: "You are in accident shock. You piled up your car. You begin to imagine how terrible it would have been if your Catherine had been with you. Next you carefully build up in your subconscious mind a whole and complete story, so well put together that to you it seems to be fact."

He was telling me what I was thinking? I wanted to pound his face in, but I had to admit that from his point of view, he was correct.

But, — *how could anyone have taken a look at the scene of the accident and not seen traces of a woman? My woman.*

"We looked," he said in answer to my unspoken question. "There was not a trace, Steve."

"You're a telepath, Doc. Dig my mind and tell me if I'm lying."

"You're smarter than that, Steve. You know very well that if you are convinced of something, you believe it, and no telepath is going to find traces of doubt. You firmly believe—"

Fingerprints?

"You'd been dating her."

Naturally!

Thorndyke nodded quietly. "There were a lot of her prints on the remains of your car. But no one could begin to put a date on them, or tell how recent was the latest, due to the fire. Then we made a door-to-door canvas of the neighborhood to be sure she hadn't wandered off in a daze and shock. Not even a footprint. Not a trace." He shook his head unhappily. "I suppose you're going to ask about that traveling bag you claim to have put in the trunk beside your own. There was no trace of any travelling bag."

I wondered what this was all about.

I let my mind ramble without saying a word, and Thorndyke was following my thoughts far closer

than he could have if I'd been rambling aloud.

There were any number of old yarns about the person whose personal traces had been cleverly erased, to the mental discomfort of someone close to them. There was the old twenty-questions parlor game. There was also Ambrose Bierce. But this time there could be no real disappearance without a trace. I knew.

"Doctor," I asked pointedly, "if we weren't together, suppose you tell me first why I had a marriage license in my pocket; second, how come I made a date with the Reverend Towle in Midtown; and third why did I bother to reserve the bridal suite in the Reignoir Hotel in Westlake? Or was I nuts a long time before this accident. Maybe," I added, "I am nuts and after making reservations, I had to go out and pile myself up as an excuse for not turning up with a bride."

"I—all I can say is that there was not a trace of a woman in that accident."

"You've been digging in my mind. Did you dig her telephone number? And you found what, when you tried to call her?"

"I—er—"

"Her landlady told you that Miss Lewis was not in her apartment because Miss Lewis was on her honeymoon, operating under

the name of Mrs. Steve Cornell. That about it?"

"All right. So now you know."

"Then where the hell is she, Doc?" The drug was not as all-powerful as it had been and I was beginning to feel excitement again.

"We don't know, Steve."

"How about the guy that hauled me out of that wreck? What does he say?"

"He was there when we arrived. The car had been hauled off you by block and tackle. By the time we got there the tackle had been burned and the car was back down again in a crumpled mess. He is a farmer by the name of Harrison. He had one of his older sons with him, a man about twenty-four, named Phillip. They both swore later that there was no woman in that car nor a trace of one."

"Oh, he did, did he?" I grunted angrily.

DR. Thorndyke shook his head slowly and then said very gently, "Steve, there's no predicting what a man's mind will do in a case of shock. I've seen 'em come up with a completely false identity, all the way back to childhood. Now, let's take your case once more. Among the other incredible items —"

"Incredible?" I roared.

"Easy, buster. Hear me out.

After all, what am I to believe—your unsubstantiated story or the evidence of a whole raft of witnesses, the police detail, the accident squad, and the guys that hauled you out of a burning car before it blew the hell up? As I was saying, how can we credit much of your tale when you—you'd not have known their names naturally—raved about one man lifting the car and the other hauling you out from underneath?"

I shrugged. "That's obviously a mistaken impression. No one could—"

"So when you admit that one hunk of your story is mistaken—"

"That doesn't prove the rest is false!"

"The police have been tracking this affair hard," said the doctor slowly. "They've gotten nowhere. Tell me, did anyone see you leave that apartment with Miss Lewis?"

"No," I said slowly. "No one that knew us."

Thorndyke shook his head unhappily. "That's why we have come to assume that you are in post-accident shock."

I snorted angrily. "Then explain the license, the date with the reverend, the hotel reservation?"

Thorndyke said quietly, "Hear me out, Steve. This is not my own idea alone, but the combined ideas of a number of people who have studied the human mind—"

"In other words, I'm nuts?"

"No. Shock."

"Shock?"

He nodded very slowly. "Let's put it this way. Let's assume that you wanted this marriage with Miss Lewis. You made preparations, furnished an apartment, got a license, made a date with a preacher, reserved a honeymoon suite, and maybe bought flowers for the bride. You take off from work, arrive at her door, only to find that Miss Lewis has taken off for parts unknown. Maybe she left you a letter—"

"Letter!"

"Hear me out, Steve. You arrive at her apartment and find her gone. You read a letter from her saying that she cannot marry you. This is a rather deep shock to you and you can't face it. Know what happens?"

"I blow my brains out along a country road at ninety miles per hour."

"Please, this is serious."

"It sounds incredibly stupid to me."

"You're rejecting it in the same way you rejected the fact that Miss Lewis ran away rather than marry you."

"Do go on, Doctor."

"You drive along the same road you'd planned to take, but the frustration and shock pile up to put you in a accident-prone frame of mind. You then pile up, not con-

siously, but as soon as you come upon something like that tree limb which can be used to make an accident authentic."

"Oh, sure."

THORNDYKE eyed me soberly. "Steve," he asked me in a brittle voice, "you won't try to convince me that any esper will let physical danger of that sort get close enough to—"

"I've told you how it happened. My attention was on that busted sign!"

"Fine. More evidence to the fact that Miss Lewis was with you? Now listen to me. Naturally in accident-shock you'd not remember anything that your mind didn't want you to recall. Failure is a hard thing to take. But now you can blame your misfortune on that accident."

"So now you tell me how you justify the fact that Catherine told landladies, friends, bosses, and all the rest that she was going to marry me a good long time before I was ready to be verbal about my plans?"

"I—"

"Suppose I've succeeded in bribing everybody to perjure themselves. Maybe we all had it in for Catherine, and did her in?"

Thorndyke shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "I really don't know, Steve. I wish I did."

"That makes two of us, you in second place," I grunted. "Hasn't anybody thought of arresting me for kidnapping, suspicion of murder, reckless driving and cluttering up the highway with junk?"

"Yes," he said quietly. "The police were most thorough. They had two of their top men look into you."

"What did they find?" I asked angrily. No man likes to have his mind turned inside out and laid out flat so that all the little wheels, cables, wires and levers are open to the public gaze. On the other hand, since I was not only innocent of any crime but as baffled as the rest of them, I'd have gone to them willingly to let them dig, to see if they could dig past my conscious mind into the real truth.

"They found that your story was substantially an honest one."

"Then why all this balderdash about shock, rejection, and so on?"

He shook his head. "None of us are supermen," he said simply. "Your story was honest, you weren't lying. You believe every word of it. You saw it, you lived it, you went through it. That doesn't prove your story true."

"Now see here—"

"It does prove one thing: that you, Steve Cornell, did not have any willful, malicious, premeditated plans against Catherine Lewis. They've checked everything from

hell to breakfast, and so far all we can do is make long-distance guesses as to what happened."

I snorted in my disgust. "That's a telepath for you. Everything so neatly laid out in rows of slats like a snow fence. Me—I'm going to consult a scholar and have him really dig me deep."

Thorndyke shook his head. "They had their top men, Steve. Scholar Redfern and Scholar Berks. Both of them Rhine Scholars, *magna cum laude*."

I blinked as I always do when I am flabbergasted. I've known a lot of doctors of this and that, from medicine to languages. I've even known a scholar or two, but none of them intimately. But when a doctor of psi is invited to take his scholarate at Rhine, that's it, brother; I pass.

Thorndyke smiled. "You weren't too bad yourself, Steve. Ran twelfth in your class at Illinois, didn't you?"

I nodded glumly. "I forgot to cover the facts. They'd culled all the bright boys out and collected them under one special-study roof. My class was the class slated to go no farther than the bachelor's degree. My psi training was only one course, not a real psi major. I studied mechanics and majored in mechanical ingenuity. Hoped to get a D. Ing. out of it, at least, but

had to stop at the master's. Partly because I'm not ingenious enough and partly because I ran out of cash."

Doctor Thorndyke nodded. "I know how it is," he said. I realized that he was leading me away from the main subject gently, but for the life of me I couldn't see how to lead him back without starting another verbal hassle. Furthermore, he had me cold. He could dig my mind and get the best way to lead me away, while I couldn't read his. I gave up. It felt better, too, getting my mind off this completely baffling puzzle even for a moment. He caught my thoughts but his face didn't twitch a bit as he picked up his narrative smoothly:

"I didn't make it either," he said unhappily. "I'm psi and good. But I'm telepath psi and not esper. I weasled my way through premed and medical by main force and awkwardness, so to speak." He grinned at me sheepishly. "I'm not much different than you or any other psi. The espers all think that the extra-sensory perception is superior to the ability to read minds, and it's vice versa. I was going to show 'em that a telepath can make scholar of medicine. So I 'pathed my way through med by reading the minds of my fellows, who were all good espers. I got so good that I could read the mind of an esper watching me do a delicate dissecting

job, and move my hands according to his perception. I could diagnose the deep ills with the best of them—so long as there was an esper in the place."

"So what tripped you up?"

"Telepaths make out best dealing with people. Espers do better with things."

"Isn't medicine a field that deals with people?"

He shook his head. "Not when a headache means spinal tumor, or indigestion, or a cold. 'Doctor,' says the patient, 'I've a bad ache along my left side just below the ribs,' and after you diagnose, it turns out to be acute appendicitis. You see, Steve, the patient doesn't know what's wrong with him. Only the symptoms. A telepath can follow the patient's symptoms perfectly, but it takes an esper to dig in his guts and perceive the tumor that's pressing on the spine or the striae in his liver."

"Yeah."

"So I flopped on a couple of tests that the rest of the class sailed through, just because I was not fast enough to read their minds and put my own ability to work. It made 'em suspicious and so here I am, a doctor instead of a scholar."

"There are fields for you, I'm sure."

HE nodded. "Two. Psychiatry and psychology, neither of

which I have any love for. And medical research, where the ability to grasp another doctor or scholar's plan, ideas and theories is slightly more important than the ability to dig esper into the experiments."

"Don't see that," I said with a shake of my head.

"Well, Steve, let's take Mekstrom's Disease, for instance."

"Let's take something simple. What I know about Mekstrom's Disease could be carved on the head of a pin with a blunt butter-knife."

"Let's take Mekstrom's. That's my chance to make Scholar of Medicine, Steve, if I can come up with an answer to one of the minor questions. I'll be in the clinical laboratory where the only cases present are those rare cases of Mekstrom's. The other doctors, espers every one of them, and the scholars over them, will dig the man's body right down to the last cell, looking and combining—you know some of the better espers can actually dig into the constituency of a cell?—but I'll be the doctor who can collect all their information, correlate it, and maybe come up with an answer."

"You picked a dilly," I told him.

It was a real one, all right. Otto Mekstrom had been a mechanic-tech at White Sands Space Station during the first flight to Venus, Mars and Moon round-trip with landings. About two weeks after

the ship came home, Otto Mekstrom's left fingertips began to grow hard. The hardening crawled up slowly until his hand was like a rock. They studied him and worked over him and took all sorts of samples and made all sorts of tests until Otto's forearm was as hard as his hand. Then they amputated at the shoulder.

But by that time, Otto Mekstrom's toes on both feet were getting solid and his other hand was beginning to show signs of the same. The creep was, as far as I'd heard, rather rapid. On one side of the creep-line, the flesh was soft and normal, but on the other it was all you could do to poke a sharp needle into the skin.

Poor Otto ended up a basket case, just in time to have the damned stuff start all over again at the stumps of his arms and legs. He died when the hardening reached his vitals.

Since that day, some twenty years ago, there had been about thirty cases a year turn up. All fatal, despite amputations and everything else known to modern medical science.

They let a few of them alone, they tried cutting off everything in sight when the stuff first began to appear. It didn't make much difference. They died. And rather horribly, so that I imagine a lot of good doctors and scholars let

them have the merciful way out once it had been established that the creep of Mekstrom's had gone so far as to leave too little time and hope of finding a cure.

God alone knew how many unfortunate human beings took to suicide without contacting the big Medical Research Center at Marion, Indiana.

Where it came from was another wonder of the age. Some folks thought it was extraterrestrial in origin, Mars or Venus, perhaps. Others figured that it was another one of those mutant plagues that turn up. Still others believed Mekstrom's Disease to be always present, but one of those so rare that humankind had to wait until nearly every other ill of the flesh had been beaten before it became evident. A few librarians were scouring the past for possible references to such a malady, but none of them had it identified positively so far. There was also a small minority that felt that Mekstrom's was a Scourge of God, sent down to punish us for our various forms of wickedness, one type of which was to violate the Heaven Above with rockets, missiles and space travel.

Well, if Thorndyke could uncover something, no one could claim that a telepath had no place in medicine. I wished him luck. I hoped that he wished me luck in my own problem.

I did not see Thorndyke again in that hospital. They released me the next day and then I had nothing to do but to chew my fingernails and wonder what had happened to Catherine.

CHAPTER III

I'D rather not go into the next week and a half in detail. I became known as the bridegroom who lost his bride, and between the veiled accusations and the half-covered snickers, life was pretty miserable. I talked to the police a couple-three times, first as a citizen asking for information and ending up as a complainant against party or parties unknown. The latter got me nowhere. Apparently the police had more lines out than the Grand Bank fishing fleet and were getting no more nibbles than they'd get in the Dead Sea. They admitted it; the day had gone when the police gave out news reports that an arrest was expected hourly, meaning that they were baffled. The police, with their fine collection of psi boys, were willing to admit when they were really baffled. I talked to telepaths who could tell me what I'd had for breakfast on the day I'd entered pre-school classes, and espers who could sense the color of the clothing I wore yesterday. Color-esper, you know, is rather advanced and it is darned

few who can get that high. I've a poor color-esper, primitive, so to speak. But these guys were good, but no matter how good they were, Catherine Lewis had vanished as neatly as Ambrose Bierce.

Hell. I even read Charles Fort, although I have no faith in the supernatural, no belief in life on the other worlds, and rather faint belief in the Hereafter. And even people who enter the Hereafter leave their remains behind for evidence.

But between lousing up on my project, and having to face Catherine's mother and father, who came East to see me, I was a complete mental wreck.

It is harder than you think to face the parents of a woman you loved, and find that all you can tell them is that somehow you fouled your drive, cracked up, and lost their daughter. Not even dead-for-sure. Death, I think, we all could have faced. But this uncertainty was something that gnawed at the soul's roots and left it rotting as it tried to stand.

To stand there and watch the tears in the eyes of a woman as she asked you, "But can't you remember, son?" is a little too much, and it is why I don't care to go into details.

The upshot of it was, after about ten days of lying awake nights and wondering where she was and why,

and watching her eyes peer out of a metal casting at me from a position sidewise of my head, disappearing when I turned to look, and dropping off to a fitful sleep when sheer fatigue caught up with me—only to come wide awake from a nightmare, either the one about us turning over and over and over, or Mrs. Lewis pleading with me only to tell the truth, and having the police inform me that they were marking this case down as ‘unexplained’ and I gave up trying to regain the place I’d lost along that highway.

I asked for and got a six months leave of absence.

I was going to return with her, or I was going to join her in whatever strange, unknown world she had entered.

THE first thing I did was to go back to the hospital in the hope that Dr. Thorndyke might be able to add something. In my unconscious ramblings there might be something that fell into a pattern if it could be pieced together.

But this was failure, too. The hospital super was sorry, but Dr. Thorndyke had left for the Medical Research Center a couple of days before. Nor could I get in touch with him because he had a six-week interim vacation and planned a long, slow jaunt through Yellowstone, with neither schedule nor

forwarding addresses.

I stood on the steps of the hospital wondering what to do next. The ‘private eye’ in stories I often read all seem to know the answers, but I had no real idea of how a detective goes about running down a missing person. I didn’t even know how to begin. I asked myself what I could hope to accomplish after the professionals, when all their facilities had given up, and the answer was disheartening.

A dismal prospect since I could not backtrack, either.

I was still standing there on the steps hoping to wave down a cruising coptercab when the door opened and a woman came out. I turned to look and she recognized me. It was Miss Farrow, my former nurse.

“Why Mr. Cornell, what are you doing back here?”

“Mostly looking for Thorndyke. He’s not here.”

“I know. Isn’t it wonderful though? He’ll get his chance to study for his scholarate now.”

I nodded glumly. “Yeah,” I said. I probably sounded resentful, but it is hard to show cheer over the good fortune of someone else when your own world has come unglued.

“Still hoping,” she said. It was a statement and not a question.

I nodded slowly. “I’m hoping I said. “Someone has the answer to this puzzle. I’ll have to find it myself. Everyone else has given up.”

"I wish you luck," said Miss Farrow with a smile. "You certainly have the determination."

I grunted. "It's about all I have. What I need is training. Here I am, a mechanical engineer, about to tackle the job of a professional detective and tracer of missing persons. About all I know about the job is what I have read. One gets the idea that these writers must know something of the job, the way they write about it. But once you're faced with it yourself, you realize that the writer has planted his own clues."

Miss Farrow nodded. "One thing," she suggested "have you talked to the people who got you out from under your car yet?"

"No, I haven't. The police talked to them and claimed they knew nothing. I doubt that I can ask them anything that the police have not satisfied themselves about."

Miss Farrow looked up at me sidewise. "You won't find anything by asking people who have never heard of you."

"I suppose not."

A coptercab came along at that moment, and probably sensing my intention, he gave his horn a tap. I'd have liked to talk longer with Miss Farrow, but a cab was what I wanted, so with a wave I took it and she went on down the steps to her own business.

I had to pause long enough to buy a new car, but a few hours afterward, I was rolling along that same highway with my esper extended as far as I could in all directions. I was driving slowly this time both alert and ready.

Someone had replaced the sign, I noticed, because the broken spoke was gone. For a moment I let my esper rest on it because the thought crossed my mind that nobody would be so finicky about a minor defacement of a road sign. Changing that sign was a bit like throwing your automobile away when the ashtrays get full.

Then I remembered my former mishap and put my eyes and esper on the road again. I was not having more of the same.

I went past the scene slowly and shut my mind off as I saw the black-burned patch. The block was still hanging from an overhead branch, and the rope that had burned off was still dangling, about two feet of it, looped through the pulleys and ending in a tapered, burned end.

I turned left into a driveway toward the home of the Harrisons and went along a winding dirt road, growing more and more conscious of a dead area ahead of me.

It was not a real dead zone, because I could still penetrate the region. But as far as really digging any of the details of the rambling

Harrison house, I could get more from my eyesight than from my sense of perception. But even if they couldn't find a really dead area, the Harrisons had done very well in finding one that made my sense of perception ineffective. It was sort of like looking through a light fog, and the closer I got to the house the thicker it became.

Just about the point where the dead area was first beginning to make its effect tell, I came upon a tall, browned man of about twenty-four who had been probing into the interior of a tractor up to the time he heard my car. He waved, and I stopped.

"Mr. Harrison?"

"I'm Phillip. And you are Mr. Cornell."

"Call me Steve like everybody else," I said. "How'd you guess?"

"Recognized you," he said with a grin. "I'm the guy that pulled you out."

"Thanks," I said, offering a hand.

He chuckled. "Steve, consider the hand taken and shook, because I've enough grime to muss up a regiment."

"It won't bother me," I said.

"Thanks, but it's still a gesture, and I appreciate it, but let's be sensible. I know you can wash, but let's shake later. What can I do for you?"

"I'd like a first-hand account,

Phil."

"Not much to tell. Dad and I were pulling stumps over about a thousand feet from the wreck. We heard the racket. Both Dad and I are esper enough to dig that distance with clarity, so we knew we'd better bring along the block and tackle. So we came on the double, Dad rigged the tackle and hoisted and I took a running dive, grabbed and hauled you out before the whole thing went *Whoosh!* We were both lucky, Steve."

I grunted a bit but managed to nod with a smile.

"I suppose you know that I'm still trying to find my fiancée?"

"I'd heard tell," he said. He looked at me sharply. I'm a total blank as a telepath, like all espers, but I could tell what he was thinking.

"Everybody is convinced that Catherine was not with me," I admitted. "But I'm not. I'm convinced that she was. I know she was."

He shook his head slowly. "As soon as we heard the screech of brakes and rubber we esped the place," he said quietly. "We dug you, of course. But no one else. Even if she'd jumped as soon as that tree limb came into view, she could not have run far enough to be out of range. As for removing a bag, she'd have had to wait until the slam-bang was over to get it

out, and by the time your car was finished rolling, Dad and I were on the way with help. She was not there, Steve."

You're a goddam liar!

PHILLIP Harrison did not move a muscle. He was blank telepathically. I was esping the muscles in his stomach, under his loose clothing, for that first tensing sign of anger, but nothing showed. He had not been reading my mind.

"It's hard to believe," I said unhappily. It was also hard to take, when you know, without a doubt in your mind that something is so, it is a damned hard proposition to be forced into hearing a lot of people say it is not so, and be forced into looking as though you accept this dictum instead of beating their faces in and calling them liars. But no man can go around accusing everyone he meets of being in some conspiracy against him without ending up in the paranoid ward with a bunch of high-grade psi boys digging into his mind and rearranging his mental evaluation of the relative importance of the data impressed there. Once they did that to me, I'd be convinced that this had all been some frightful nightmare far removed from reality, and therefore I'd subdue the vivid impression, and eventually it would return as the memory of a disturbing dream I'd once had. Eventually

I'd be telling people about *my* dream whenever a discussion of dreams came up at a party and wistfully recounting *my* lost love whenever the talk turned to the love and romance that did not jell.

Well, I was not going to talk like a madman, even though this denial of what I knew to be true might eventually drive me into talking to myself exclusively because nobody else made sense.

I smiled thinly at Phil Harrison and shrugged.

He smiled back sympathetically, but behind it I could see that he was wishing that I'd stop harping on a dead subject. "I sincerely wish I could be of help," he said. In that he was sincere, as he said. But somewhere, someone was not, and I wanted to find out who it was.

The impasse looked as though it might go on forever unless I turned away and left. I had no desire to leave. Not that Phil could help me, I admitted, but even though this was a dead end, I was loath to leave the place because it was the last place where I had been close to Catherine.

I think the silence between us must have been a bit strained at this point, but luckily we had an interruption. I perceived motion, turned and caught sight of a woman coming along the road toward us.

"My sister," said Phil. "Marian."

Marian Harrison was quite a girl; if I'd not been emotionally tied to Catherine Lewis, I'd have been happy to invite myself in. Marian was almost as tall as I am, a dark brown-haired woman with eyes of a startling, electricity colored blue. She was wearing a pair of wash-bleached shorts that looked like a pair of her brother's, work-type sandals, and a calico-printed bra that might have been swim-suit, underwear, or intimately casual, but hardly the sort of thing a girl wears when entertaining visitors she'd never seen before. Marian was about twenty-two, young and healthy. Her skin was tanned toast brown so that the bright blue eyes fairly sparked out at you. Her red mouth made a pleasing blend with the tan of her skin and her teeth gleamed white when she smiled.

SHE tossed her hair back and pushed it behind her left ear, which I accepted as a gesture to show me that she wore no rings on her left hand—just in case I happened to be neither esper nor telepath and therefore had to use my eyesight to determine her martial or emotional status. This, I find, is a universal gesture among women, even when they have no interest whatsoever in the man close by. I

gathered that she was no telepath either, because she would have read that I was there seeking my fiancée and she might not then have bothered to wave that hand in full view. This was not positive because, as I've said women do this thing automatically.

Deliberately I esped the fastening of her bra across her spine, thinking, *Two hooks to unfasten*—but Marian did not appear to notice. She was no telepath.

"You're Mr. Cornell," she said. "I remembered you," she said quietly. "Please believe us, Mr. Cornell, when we extend our sympathy."

"Thanks," I said glumly. "Please understand me, Miss Harrison. I appreciate your sympathy, but what I need is action and information and answers. Once I get those, the sympathy won't be needed."

"Of course I understand," she replied instantly. "We are all aware that sympathy is a poor substitute. All the world grieving with you doesn't turn a stitch to help you out of your trouble. All we can do is to wish, with you, that it hadn't happened."

"That's the point," I said helplessly. "I don't even know what happened."

"That makes it even worse," she said softly. Marian had a pleasant voice, throaty and low, that sound-

ed intimate even when talking about something pragmatic. "I wish we could help you, Steve."

"I wish someone could."

She nodded. "They asked me about it, too, even though I was not present until afterward. They asked me," she said thoughtfully, "about the mental attitude of a woman running off to get married. I told them that I couldn't speak for your woman, but that I might be able to speak for me, putting myself in the same circumstances."

She paused a moment, and her brother turned idly back to his tractor and fitted a small end wrench to a bolthead and gave it a twist; he seemed to think that as long as Marian and I were talking, he could well afford to get along with his work. I agreed with him. I wanted information but I did not expect the entire world to stop progress to help me. He spun the bolt and started on another, lost in his own job while Marian went on:

"I told them that your story was authentic—the one about the bridal nightgown." A very slight color came under the deep tan. "I told them that I have one, too, still in its wrapper, and that someday I'd be planning marriage and packing a go-away bag with the gown shaken out and then packed neatly. I told them that I'd be doing the same thing no matter whether we were having a formal church wed-

ding with a four-alarm reception and all the trimmings or a quiet elopement such as you were. I told them that it was the essentials that count, not the trimmings and the tinsel. My questioner's remark was to the effect that either you were telling the truth, or that you had espied a woman about to marry and identified her actions with your own wishes."

"I know which," I said with a sour smile. "It was both."

MARIAN nodded. "Then they asked me if it were probable that a woman would take this step completely unprepared and I laughed at them. I told them that long before Rhine, women were putting their nuptial affairs in order about the time the gentleman was beginning to view marriage with an attitude slightly less than loathing, and that by the time he popped the question, she'd been practicing writing her name as 'Mrs.' and picking out the china-ware and prospective names for the children, and that if any woman had ever been stunned by a proposal of marriage, so that she'd take off without so much as a toothbrush, no one in history had ever heard of her."

"Then you begin to agree with me?"

She shrugged. "Please," she said in that low voice. "Don't ask me

my opinion of your veracity. You believe it, but all the evidence lies against you. There was not a shred of woman-trace anywhere along your course, from the point along the road where you first caught sight of that limb that threw you to the place where you piled up. Nor was there a trace anywhere in a rather vast circle—almost a half mile they searched—from the crack-up. They had doctors of psi digging for footprints, shreds of clothing, everything. Not a trace."

"But where did she go?" I cried, and when I say 'cried' I mean just that.

Marian shook her head very slowly. "Steve," she said in a voice so low that I could hardly hear her over the faint shrill of bolts being unscrewed by her brother, "so far as we know, she was never here. Why don't you forget her—"

I looked at her. She stood there, poised and a bit tensed as though she were trying to force some feeling of affectionate kinhood across the gap that separated us, as though she wanted to give me both physical and mental comfort despite the fact that we were strangers on a ten-minute first-meeting. There was distress in her face.

"Forget her—"? I ground out. "I'd rather die!"

"Oh Steve—no!" One hand went to her throat and the other came out to fasten around my forearm. Her grip was hard.

I stood there wondering what the hell to do next. Marian's grip on my arm relaxed and she stepped back.

I pulled myself together. "I'm sorry," I told her honestly. "I'm putting you through a set of emotional hurdles by bringing my problems here. I'd better take them away."

She nodded very slowly. "Please go. But please come back once you get yourself squared away, no matter how. We'd all like to see you when you aren't all tied up inside."

Phil looked up from the guts of the tractor. "Take it easy, Steve," he said. "And remember that you do have friends here."

Blindly I turned from them and stumbled back to my car. They were a pair of very fine people, firm upright. Marian's grip on my arm had been no weaker than her sympathy, and Phil's less-emotional approach to my trouble was no less deep actually. It was as strong as his good right arm, loosening the head bolts of a tractor engine with a small adjustable crescent wrench.

I'd be back. I wanted to see them again. I wanted to go back there with Catherine and introduce them to my refund fiancée or wife. But

I was definitely going to go back.

I was quite a way toward home before I realized that I had not met the old man. I bet myself that Father Harrison was quite the firm, active patriarch.

CHAPTER IV

THE days dragged slowly. I faced each morning hopefully at first, but as the days dragged on and on, I began to feel that each morning was opening another day of futility, to be barely borne until it was time to flop down in weariness. I faced the night in loneliness and in anger at my own inability to do something productive.

I pestered the police until they escorted me to the door and told me that if I came again, they'd take me to another kind of door and lose thereafter the key. I shrugged and left disconsolately, because by that time I had been able to esp, page by page the entire file that dealt with the case of "Missing Person: Lewis, Catherine," stamped "Inactive, but not Closed."

I hated the words.

But as the days dragged out, one after another, with no respite and no hope, my raw nervous system began to heal. It was probably a case of numbness; you maul your thumb with a hammer and it will hurt just so long before it stops.

I was numb for a long time. I

remember night after night, lying awake and staring into the darkness at the wall I knew was beside me, and I hated my esper because I wanted to project my mind out across some unknown space to reach for Catherine's mind. If we'd both been telepaths we could cross the universe to touch each other's mind with that affectionate tenderness that mated telepaths always claim they have.

Instead I found myself aware of a clouded-veil perception of Marion Harrison as she took my arm and looked into my face on that day when I admitted that I found little worth living for.

I knew what that meant—nothing. It was a case of my subconscious mind pointing out that the available present was more desirable than the unavailable not-present. At first I resented my apparent inconstancy in bringing in an esper projection of Marian Harrison when I was trying to project my blank telepathic inadequacy to Catherine. But as the weeks faded into the past, the shock and the frustration began to pale and I found Marian's projective image less and less an unwanted intrusion and more and more pleasant.

I had two deeply depressed spells in those six weeks. At the end of the fourth week I received a small carton containing some of

my personal junk that had been in Catherine's apartment. A man can't date his girl every night for weeks without dropping a few things like a cigarette lighter, a tie clip, one odd cuff-link, some papers, a few letters, some books and a collection of stuff valuable and worthless that had turned up as gifts for one reason or another. It was a shock to get this box and its arrival bounced me deep into a doldrum period for three or four days.

Then at the end of the sixth week I received a card from Dr. Thorndyke. It contained a lithograph in stereo of some familiar scene in Yellowstone other than Old Faithful blowing its stack.

On the message side was a cryptic note:

"Steve: I just drove along that road in the right side of the picture. It reminded me of you, so I'm writing because I want to know how you are making out. I'll be at the Med-Center in a couple of weeks, you can write me there.

Jim Thorndyke"

I turned the postcard over and eyed it critically. Then I got it. Along the roadside was a tall ornamental standard of wrought iron. The same design as the road signs along that fatal highway of mine.

I sat there with a magnifying glass on the road sign; its stereo image standing up alongside the road in full color and solidity. It

took me back to that moment when Catherine had wriggled against my side, thrilling me with her warmth and eagerness.

That put me down for a few days, too.

ANOTHER month passed. I'd come out of my shell quite a bit in the meantime. I now felt that I could walk into a bar and have a drink without wondering whether all the other people in the place were pointing at me. I'd cut myself off from all my previous friends, and I'd made no new friends in the weeks gone by. But I was getting more and more lonely and consequently more and more inclined to speak to people and want friends.

The accident had paled from its original horror; the vital scene returned only infrequently. Catherine was assuming the position of a lost love rather than a sweetheart expected to return soon. I remembered the warmth of her arms and the eagerness of her kiss in a nostalgic way and my mind, especially when in a doze would play me tricks. I would recall Catherine, but when she came into my arms her body was muscle-hard as she pressed against me instead of lissome and soft. And then I'd be holding Marian, brown and tawny, her electric blue eyes and her vibrant nature shaded and slack with

the lassitude of anticipated ecstasy that would take only a caress to arouse into strong, demanding vitality.

But I did nothing about it. I knew that once I had asked Marian Harrison for a date I would be emotionally involved. And then if—no, when—Catherine turned up I would be torn between desires.

I would wake up and call myself all sorts of a fool. I had seen Marian for a total of perhaps fifteen minutes—in the company of her brother.

But eventually dreaming loses its sting just as futile waiting and searching does, and I awoke one morning in a long and involved debate between my id and my conscience. I decided at that moment that I would take that highway out and pay a visit to the Harrison farm. I was salving my slightly rusty conscience by telling myself that it was because I had never paid my respects to Father Harrison, but deep inside—or not too deep inside I knew that if Father were missing and Daughter were present I'd enjoy my visit to the farm with more relish.

My conscience faded completely and it was only by reminding myself that this was a respect call and not an assignation that I managed to keep id from convincing me that I should telephone first to make sure that the more desirable mem-

ber would be home and receiving.

But id took a licking because the doorbell rang about nine o'clock that morning and when I dug the doorstep I came up with two gentlemen wearing gold badges in leather folders in their jacket pockets.

I opened the door because I couldn't have played absent to a team consisting of one esper and one telepath. They both knew I was home.

"Mr. Cornell, we'll waste no time. We want to know how well you know Doctor James Thorn-dyke."

I didn't blink at the bluntness of it. This I knew was standard technique when an esper-telepath team went investigating. The telepath knew all about me, including the fact that I'd dug their wallets and identification cards, badges and the serial numbers of the nasty little automatics they carried. The idea was to drive the important question hard and first; it being almost impossible, even with training, to not-think the several quick answers that pop through your mind. What I knew about Thorn-dyke was sketchy enough but they must have gotten it all because I didn't have any reason for covering up and I let them know that, too.

Finally, *That's about all, I thought. Now—why?*

THE telepath half of the team answered. "Normally we wouldn't answer, Mr. Cornell, unless you said it aloud. But we don't mind letting you know which of us is the telepath this time. As to your answer, so far as we can trace, you are the last person to have received any message from Thorn-dyke."

"I—what?"

"That postcard. It was the last contact Thorndyke made with anyone we can locate. He has disappeared."

"But—"

"Thorndyke was due to arrive at the Medical Research Center in Marian, Indiana three weeks ago. We've been tracking him ever since he failed to turn up. We've been able to retrace his meanderings fairly well up to a certain point in Yellowstone. There the trail stops. He had a telephoned reservation to a small hotel; there he dropped out of sight. Now, Mr. Cornell, may I see that postcard?"

"Certainly." I got it for them. The esper took it over to the window and eyed it in the light, and as he did that I went over to stand beside him and together we espered that postcard until I thought the edges would start to curl. But if there were any codes, concealed writings or any other form of hidden meaning or message in or on that card, I didn't dig any.

I gave up. I'm no trained investigator. But I knew that Thorn-dyke was fairly well acquainted with the depth of my perceptive sense, and he would not have concealed anything too deep for me. Esper is funny that way, I've found. Sometimes even funnier. I remember a case in high school when a girl I'd been trying to rush sent me a postcard from someplace during vacation and inadvertently managed to make a crude acrostic in her written message. I dug it at once and was all prepared to dive in headlong and make time when she got back, only to find that she hadn't meant anything at all.

Then the esper shook his head. He handed me the card. "Not a trace."

The telepath nodded. He looked at me and smiled sort of thin and strained. "We're naturally interested in you, Mr. Cornell. This seems to be the second time. And both times you know nothing about it."

"I know," I said slowly. The puzzle began to go around and around in my head again, all the way back to that gleaming road and the crack-up.

"We'll probably be back, Mr. Cornell. You don't mind?"

"Look," I told them rather firmly, "if this puzzle can be unwound, I'll be one of the happiest men on the planet. And if I can do anything to help, just say the word."

They left after that and so did I. I was still going to pay my visit to the Harrison farm. Another wild goose chase, but somewhere along this cock-eyed row there was an angle. Honest people who are healthy and fairly happy with good prospects ahead of them do not just drop out of sight. Not without a trace.

A couple of hours later I was making a good pace along the highway again. It was getting familiar to me.

The burned scar was fading in a growth of tall weeds. The limb of the tree that hung out over the scene, from which block and tackle had hung was beginning to lose its smoke-blackened appearance. The block was gone from the limb, *Probably back in service*, I thought. I slowed to look.

Give us another year, I thought, and the only remaining scar will be the one on my mind, and even that will be fading.

I turned into the drive, wound around the homestead road, and pulled up in front of the big, rambling house.

It looked a bit bleak. The front lawn was a bit shaggy and there were some wisps of paper on the front porch. The venetian blinds were down and slatted shut behind closed windows. Since it was summer by now, the closed windows

and the tight door, neither of which had flyscreens installed, gave the fact away quickly. The Harrisons were gone.

Another disappearance?

I turned quickly and drove to the nearest town and went to the post office.

"I'm looking for the Harrison family," I told the man behind the wicket.

"Why, they moved several weeks ago."

"Moved?" I asked with a blank-sounding voice.

The clerk nodded. Then he leaned forward and said in a confidential whisper, "Heard a rumor that the girl got a touch of that spacemen's disease."

"Mekstrom's?" I blurted.

The clerk looked at me as if I'd shouted a dirty word. "She was a fine girl," he said softly. "It's a shame."

I nodded and he went into the back files. I tried to dig along behind him, but the files were in a small dead area in the rear of the building. I swore under my breath although I'd half-expected to find files in dead areas. Just as Rhine Institute was opened, the Government combed the country side for dead or cloudy area for their secret and confidential files. There had been one mad claim-staking rush with the Government about six feet ahead of the rest of the general

public, business and the underworld.

He came back with a sorrowful look. "They left a concealed address," he said.

I felt like flashing a twenty at him like a private eye did in the old tough-books, but I knew it wouldn't work. Rhine made it impossible for a public official to take a bribe. So instead, I tried to look distressed.

"This is extremely important. I'd say it was a matter of life and death."

"I'm sorry. A concealed forwarding address is still concealed. If you must get in touch with them, you might drop them a letter to be forwarded. Then if they care to answer, they'll reply to your home."

"Later," I told him. "I'll probably be back to mail it direct from here."

He waved at the writing desk. I nodded and left.

I drove back to the Harrison Farm, ex-Harrison Farm, slowly, thinking it over. Wondering. People did not just go around catching Mekstrom's Disease, from what little I knew of it. And somehow the idea of Marian Harrison withering away or becoming a basket case, or maybe taking the painless way out was a thought that my mind kept avoiding except for occasional flashes of horror.

I drove in toward the farmhouse again and parked in front of the verandah. I was not sure of why I was there except that I wanted to wander through it to see what I could find before I went back to the post office to write that card or letter.

The back of the house was locked with an old-fashioned slide bolt that was turned with what they used to call an "E" key. I shrugged, oiled my conscience and found a bit of bent wire. Probing a lock like that would have been easy for a total blank; with esper I lifted the simple keepers and slid back the bolt almost as swiftly as if I had used a proper key.

This was no case of disappearance. They had moved deliberately. In every one of the fourteen rooms were the unmistakable signs of a deliberate removal. Discarded stuff was mixed with the odds and ends of packing case materials, a scattered collection of temporary nails, a half-finished but never used box was filled with old clothing.

I pawed through this but found nothing, even though I separated it from the rest to help my esper dig it without interference.

I roamed the house slowly letting my perception wander from point to point. I tried to time-dig the place but that was futile. I didn't have enough perception.

I caught only one response. It

was in one of the upper bedrooms that probably had been Marian's. But then as I stopped still in the room where Marian had slept, I began again to doubt my senses. It could have been esper, but it was more likely that I'd caught the dying traces of perfume.

Then this was blotted out because I suddenly realized that the entire premises were clear to me!

An esper map of the world looked sort of like a mottled sky, with bright places and cloudy places strewn in disorder across it. A mottled sky, except that the psi-pattern did not change. But this house had been in a murky area, if not dead. Now it was clear.

I decided that as soon as I had a chance, I'd go look up some scholar of psi and ask him if the psi-pattern ever shifted.

I left the house and went to the big combination barn and garage. It was as unsatisfying as the house had been.

Phillip Harrison, or someone, had had a workshop out there. I found the bench and a small table where bolt-holes, oil marks, and other traces said that there had been one of those big combination woodworking machines there, the kind that combines circular saw, drill, lathe, planer router dado, and does everything, including the removal of fingers if the operator isn't smarter than the machine.

There had been some metal-working stuff there, too, but nothing as elaborate as the woodshop. Mostly things like handsaws and an electric drill, and a circular scar where a blowtorch had been sitting.

I don't know why I kept on standing there esping the abandoned setup. Maybe it was because my esper dug the fact that there was something there that I should know about, but which was so minute or remote that the impression did not come through. I stood there puzzled at my own reluctance to leave until something satisfied that almost imperceptible impression.

IDLY I leaned down and picked up a bit of metal from the floor and fumbled it in my hand nervously. I looked around the place with my eyes and saw nothing. I gave the whole garage a thorough scanning with my esper and got zero for my trouble.

Finally I snarled at myself for being an imbecile, and left.

Everyone has done what I did, time and time again. I do not recall anything of my walk back to the car, lost in a whirl of thoughts, ideas, plans and questions. I would probably have driven all the way back to my apartment with my mind in that whirligig, driving by habit and training, but I was taken out of it because I could not start

my car by poking that bit of metal in the lock. It did not fit.

I laughed, a bit ashamed of my preoccupation, and flung the bit of metal into the grass, poked my key in the lock—

And then I was out pawing the grass for that piece of metal.

For the small piece of metal I had found on the floor of the abandoned workshop was the spoke of that road sign that had been missing when Catherine and I had cracked up!

I drove out along the highway and stopped near one of the standards. I esped the sign, compared my impression against my eyesight. I made sure.

That bit of metal, a half inch long and a bit under a quarter inch in diameter with both ends faintly broken-ragged was identical in size and shape to the new spokes in the sign!

Then I noticed something else. The trefoil ornament in the middle did not look the same as I recalled them. I took Thorndyke's card out of my pocket and looked at the stereo. I compared the picture against the real thing before me and I knew that I was right.

The trefoil gizmo was a take-off on the fleur-de-lis or the Boy Scout Tenderfoot badge, or the design they use to signify North on a card-compass. But the lower flare of the leaves or whatever was wider

than any of the more familiar emblems; these were almost as wide as the top. It took a comparison to tell the difference between one of them right-side-up and another one upside-down. One assumes, for this design that the larger foils are supposed to be up. If that were so, then the ones along that road out there in or near Yellowstone were right-side-up, while the ones along my familiar highway were upside-down.

I goaded myself. *Memory, have these things been turned or were they always upside-down?*

The last thing I did as I turned off the highway was to stop and let my esper dig that design once more. I covered the design itself, let my perception roam along the spokes, and then around the circlet that supported the spokes that held the trefoil emblem.

Oh, it was not obvious. It was designed in, so to speak. If I were asked even today for my professional opinion, I would have to admit that the way the circlet snapped into the rest of the ornamental scrollwork was a matter of good assembly design, and not a design deliberately created so that the emblem could be turned upside down.

In fact, if it had not been for that tiny, broken spoke I found on the floor of the Harrison garage,

never in a million years would I have considered these road signs significant.

AT the postoffice I wrote a letter to Phillip Harrison.

"Dear Phil:

I was by your old place today and was sorry to find that you had moved. I'd like to get in touch with you again. If I may ask, please send me your forwarding address. I'll keep it concealed if you like, or I'll reply through the post office, concealed forward.

As an item of interest did you know that your house has lost its deadness? A medium-equipped esper can dig it with ease. Have you ever heard of the psi-pattern changing before?

Oh, and another item, that road sign with the busted spoke has been replaced. You must be a bum shot, not to be able to hit that curlicue in the middle. I found the spoke you hit on the floor of your garage, if you'd like it for a souvenir of one close miss but no cigar.

Please write and let me know how things are going. Rumor has it that Marion contracted Mekstrom's and if you will pardon my mentioning a delicate subject, I am doing

it because I do really want to do something to help if I am able. After all, no matter how lightly you hold it, I still owe you my life. This is a debt I do not intend to forget.

Sincerely,
Steve Cornell."

CHAPTER V

I DID not go to the police.

They were sick of my face and already considering me a candidate for the paranoid ward. All I would have to do is go roaring into the station, or make a call to the F.B.I. to tell them that I had uncovered some deep plot where the underground was using ornamental road signs to conceal their own network of roads and directions, and that the disappearance of Catherine Lewis, Dr. Thorndyke and the removal of the Harrisons were all tied together.

Next step: Mental Revaluation. End for Steve Cornell, esper.

Instead, I closed my apartment and told everyone that I was going to take a long, rambling tourist jaunt to settle my nerves; that I thought that getting away from the scene might finish the job that time and rest had started.

Then I started to drive. I drove for several days, not attempting to pace off miles, but covering a lot of aimless-direction territory. I

was just as likely to spend four hours going North on one highway, and then take the next four coming back south on a parallel highway, and sometimes I even came back to the original starting place.

After a week I had come no farther West than across that sliver of West Virginia into Eastern Ohio. And in Eastern Ohio I saw the first of the now familiar and suspicious road signs.

The emblem was right side up, and the signs looked as though they had not been up long.

I followed that road for seventy-five miles, and as I went the signs kept getting newer and newer until I finally came to a truck loaded with pipe, hardware, and ornamental ironwork. Leading the truck was one of those iron mole things that dig a posthole through anything but granite in about half a minute, sets the pole, runs concrete into the gap, and then stamps the loose ground back down.

I watched the automatic gear hoist one of the old pipe and panel, white and black enamel roadsigns up by its roots, and place it on a truck full of discards. I watched the mole drive a corkscrew blade into the ground with a roaring of engine and a bucking of the truck. It paused, pulled upward to bring out the screw and its load of dirt, stones and gravel.

The crew placed one of the new signs in the cradle and I watched the machine set the sign upright, pour the concrete, tamp down the earth, and then moved along down the road.

There was little point in asking questions of the crew, so I just took off and drove to Columbus as hard as I could make it.

SHINED, cleaned, polished, and very conservatively dressed I presented myself to the State Commissioner of Roads and Highways. I toyed briefly with the idea of representing myself as a minor official from some distant state like Alaska or the Virgin Islands, inquiring about these signs for official reasons. But then I knew that if I bumped into a hot telepath I'd be in the soup. On the other hand, mere curiosity on the part of a citizen, well oiled with compliments, would get me at the very least a polite answer.

The Commissioner's fifth under-secretary bucked me down the hall; another office bucked me upstairs. A third buck-around brought me to the Department of Highways Marking and Road Maps.

A sub-secretary finally admitted that he might be able to help me. His name was Houghston. But whether he was telepath or esper did not matter because the Commission building was constructed

right in the middle of one of the deadest areas I have ever been in.

I still played it straight. I told him I was a citizen of New York, interested in the new road signs. Ohio was to be commended.

"I'm glad you feel that way," he said beaming.

"I presume these signs cost quite a bit more than the stark, black and white enamel jobs?"

"On the contrary," he said with pride. "They might, but mass-production methods brought the cost down. You see, the enamel jobs, while we buy several thousand of the plates for any highway, must be set up, stamped out, enamelled, and so on. The new signs are all made in one plant and as they are needed; I don't suppose you know, but the highway number and any other information is put on the plate from loose, snap-in letters. That means we can buy so many thousand of this or that letter or number, and the necessary base plates and put them together as needed. They admitted that they were still running at a loss, but if they could get enough states interested, they'd eventually come out even, and maybe they could reduce the cost. Why, they even have a contingent-clause in the contract stating that if the cost were lowered, they would make a rebate to cover it. That's so the first users will not bide their

time instead of buying now."

He went on and on and on like any bureaucrat. I was glad we were in a dead area because he'd have thrown me out of his office for what I was thinking.

Eventually Mr. Houghston ran down and I left.

I toyed around with the idea of barging in on the main office of the company but I figured that might be too much like poking my head into a hornet's nest.

I pocketed the card he gave me from the company, and I studied the ink-fresh road map, which he had proudly supplied. It pointed out in a panel, a replica of the panel on the fancy signs, that the State of Ohio was beautifying their highways with these new signs at no increased cost to the taxpayer, and that the dates in green on the various highways here and there gave the dates when the new signs would be installed. The bottom of the panel gave the Road Commissioner's name in boldface with Houghston's name below in slightly smaller print.

I smiled. Usually I get mad at the various ways and means that a politician uses to keep his name favorably displayed, like those signs that proclaim that such and such a tunnel is being created by the goodwill and office of Mayor So-and-So. As if the good mayor were out there with a shovel and

hoe digging the tunnel with the aid of his office staff. But this sort of thing, if it hadn't been for the sinister side, would have been a worthy cause.

I selected a highway that had been completed, along near Cincinnati and made my way there with no waste of time.

THE road was new and it was another beaut. The signs led me on, mile after mile and sign after sign.

I did not know what I was following, and I was not sure I knew what I was looking for, but I was on the trail of something and a bit of activity, both mental and physical, after weeks of blank-wall frustration made my spirits rise and my mental equipment sharper. The radio in the car was yangling with hillbilly songs, the only thing you can pick up in Ohio, it seems to me, but I didn't care. I was looking for something significant.

I found it late in the afternoon about halfway between Dayton and Cincinnati. One of the spokes was missing.

Fifty yards ahead was a crossroad.

I hauled in with a whine of rubber and brakes, and sat there trying to reason out my next move by logic.

Logic failed. Do I turn with the

missing spoke, or do I turn with the one that is not missing?

Memory came to my aid. The "ten o'clock" spoke had been missing back there near the Harrison farm. The Harrisons had lived on the left side of the highway. One follows the missing spoke. Here the "two o'clock spoke was missing, so I turned to the right along the crossroad until I came to another sign that was complete.

Then, wondering, I U-turned and drove back across the main highway and drove for about five miles watching the signs as I went. The ones on my right had that trefoil emblem upside down. The ones on my left were right side up. The difference was so small that only someone who knew the significance would distinguish one from the other. So far as I could reason out, it meant that what I sought was in the other direction. When the emblem was upside down I was going away from, and when right side up, I was going toward.

Away from or toward what?

I U-turned again and started following the signs.

Twenty miles beyond the main highway where I'd seen the sign that announced the turn, I came upon another missing spoke. This indicated a turn to the left, and so I slowed down until I came upon a homestead road leading off toward a farmhouse.

I turned, determined to make like a man lost and hoping that I'd not bump into a telepath.

A few hundred yards in from the main road I came upon a girl who was walking briskly toward me. I stopped. She looked at me with a quizzical smile and asked if she could be of any help.

Brashly, I nodded. "I'm looking for some old friends of mine," I said. "Haven't seen them for ten years. Named Harrison."

She smiled up at me. "I don't know of any Harrison around here." Her voice had the Ohio twang.

"No?"

"Just where do they live?"

I eyed her carefully, hoping my glance did not look like a wolf eyeing a lamb. "Well, they gave me some crude directions. Said I was to turn at the main highway onto this road and come about twenty miles and stop on the left side when I came upon one of those new road signs where someone had shot one of the spokes out."

"Spokes? Left side—" She mumbled the words and was apparently mulling the idea around in her mind. She was a youngster, not more than about seventeen, suntanned and animal-alive from living in the open.

I wondered about her. As far as I was concerned, she was part and parcel of this whole mysterious af-

fair. No matter what she said or did, it was an obvious fact that the hidden road sign directions pointed to this farm. And since no one at seventeen can be kept in complete ignorance of the business of the parents, she must be aware of some of the ramifications.

After some thought she said, "No, I don't know of any Harrisons."

I grunted. I was really making the least of this, now that I'd arrived.

"Your folks at home?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied.

"I think I'll drop in and ask them, too."

She shrugged. "Go ahead," she said with the non-committal attitude of youth. "You didn't happen to notice whether the mailbox flag was up, did you?"

I hadn't, but I esped back quickly and said, "Yes, it was."

"Then the mailman hasn't been yet to pick up. So," she said with youthful redundancy, "he hasn't been to deliver either."

I had to smile at her. Then she said, "Mind if I ride back to the house with you, Mister?"

"Hop in."

She smiled brightly and got in quickly. I took off down the road toward the house at an easy pace. She seemed interested in the car, and finally said, "I've never been in a car like this before. New?"

"Few weeks," I responded.

"Fast?"

"If you want to make it go fast. She'll take this rocky road at fifty, if anyone wants to be so foolish."

"Let's see,"

I laughed. "Nobody but an idiot would tackle a road like this at fifty."

"I like to go fast. My brother takes it at sixty."

That, so far as I was concerned, was youthful exaggeration. I was busy telling her all the perils of fast driving when a rabbit came barrelling out of the bushes along one side and streaked across in front of me. It startled me. I should have perceived it, and then I'd have been prepared to let the car go along and to hang with the fauna that got in the way. There have been more accidents caused by someone trying to avoid an animal than there were ever animals killed.

But the rabbit startled me and I twitched the wheel. The car went out of the narrow road and up on the shoulder, tilting quite a bit; beyond the rabbit I swung back into the road, but not before the youngster had grabbed my arm to keep from being tossed all over the front seat.

Her grip was like someone closing down a hydraulic vice. My arm went numb and my fingers went limp on the wheel. I struggled with

my left hand to spin the wheel to keep on the narrow, winding road and my foot hit the brake to bring the car down, but fast.

TAKING a deep breath as we stopped, I shook my right hand by holding it in my left at the wrist. It was a mass of tingling pins and needles because she had grabbed me just above the elbow. It felt as though it would have taken only a trifle more to pinch my arm off and leave me with a bloody stump.

"Sorry, Mister," she said breathlessly, her eyes wide open. Her face was white around the corners of the mouth and at the edges of her nose. The whiteness of the flesh under the deep tan gave her a completely frightened look, far more than the shake-up could have produced.

I reached over and took her hand. "That's a mighty powerful grip you—"

The flesh of her hand was hard and solid. Not the meaty solidity of good tone, fine training and excellent health. It was the solidity of a—all I could think of at the time was a green canteloupe, or a cucumber. I squeezed a bit and the flesh gave way only a trifle. I rubbed my thumb over her palm and found it solid-hard instead of soft and yielding.

I looked down at the hand and

wondered.

I had never seen a case of Mekstrom's Disease— before!

"Mister," she said levelly, "you'd better come in with me!"

"Oh—no!" I growled.

She did not answer. She just clamped onto my arm again and squeezed until it went numb. "In," she said in a voice that I found it difficult to associate with a girl of sixteen or seventeen. It was the hard, certain voice of a self-confident adult.

I took her hand; she must have permitted me to because I could not have forced her hand open with my own strength against her will. I looked down at the hand and said, "Young lady, do you realize that you have an advanced case of Mekstrom's Disease?"

She eyed me coldly. "Now," she said in that hard voice, "I know you'll come in."

I should have known better than to slip; yet I had to shoot my big trap off because something in my make-up objects violently to being ordered around by a slip of a girl. I balance off at about one-sixty. I guessed her at about two thirds of that, say one-ten or thereabouts—

"One-eight," she said levelly. "In the raw and not wringing wet."

A telepath!

"Yes," she replied calmly. "And I don't mind letting you know it, so you'll not try anything stupid."

I'm getting the hell out of here!

"No, you're not. You are coming in with me."

"Like hell!" I exploded.

"Don't be silly. You'll come in. Or shall I lay one along your jaw and carry you?"

I had to try something, anything, to get free. Yet—

"Now you're being un-bright," she told me insolently. "You should know that you can't plan any surprise move with a telepath. And if you try a frontal attack I'll belt you so cold they'll have to put you in the oven for a week."

I just let her ramble for a few seconds because when she was rattling this way she couldn't put her entire mental attention on my thoughts. So while she was yaking it off, I had an idea that felt as though it might work.

When she realized that her mouthing had given me a chance to think she shut up like a clam, and I went into high gear with my perception:

Not bad—for a kid. Growing up fast. A bit over due for the next bra-size, very neat they are. Been playing hookey from momma, leaving off your panties like the big girls do. I can tell by the elastic cord marks you had 'em on not long ago.

Seventeeners have a lot of modesty, a lot more than they like

to admit. She was either shocked or stumped or both by my cold-blooded catalog of her body, just long enough for me to make a quick lunge across her lap to the door handle on her side.

I flipped it over and gave her a shove at the same time. She went bottom over appetite in a sprawl that would have jarred the teeth loose in a normal body and might have cracked a few bones. But she landed on the back of her neck, rolled and came to her feet like a cat.

I didn't wait to close the door. I just tromped on the go-pedal and the car leaped forward with a jerk that slammed the door for me. I roared forward and left her just as she was making another grab.

How I hoped to get out of there I did not know. All I wanted was momentary freedom to think. I turned this way and that to follow the road until I came to the house. I left the road, circled the house with the turbine keening like a banshee and the car taking the corners on the outside wheels. I skidded into a turn like a racing driver and ironed my wheels out flat on the takeaway, rounded another corner and turned back into the road again going the other way.

She was standing there waiting for me as I pelted past at a good sixty, and she reached out one girder-strong arm, latched onto the frame of the open window of my

side, and swung onto the half-inch trim along the bottom of the car-body like a switchman hooking a freight car.

She reached for the steering wheel with her free hand.

I knew what was to happen next. She'd casually haul and I'd go off the road into a tree or pile up in a ditch, and while the smoke was clearing out of my mind, she'd be untangling me from the wreck and carting me over her shoulder, without a scratch to show for her adventure.

I yanked the wheel— Whip! Whap!— cutting an arc. I slammed past a tree, missing it by half an inch. I wiped her off the side of the car like a mailbag is clipped from the fast express by the catch-hook.

I heard a cry of "Whoof!" as her body hit the trunk of the tree. But as I regained the road and went racing on to safety, I saw in the rear view mirror that she had bounced off the tree, sprawled a bit, caught her balance, and was standing in the middle of the road, shaking her small, but very dangerous fist at my tail license plate.

I didn't stop driving at one-ten until I'd covered half of that distance and was above Dayton again. Then I paused along the road to take stock.

Stock? What the hell did I know, really?

I'd uncovered and confirmed the fact that there was some secret organization that had a program that included their own highway system, concealed within the confines of the United States. I was almost certain by this time that they had been the prime movers in the disappearance of Catherine and Dr. Thorndyke. They—

I suddenly re-lived the big crack-up.

Willingly now, no longer rejecting the memory, I followed my recollection as Catherine and I went along that highway at a happy pace. With care I recalled every detail of Catherine, watching the road through my mind and eyes, how she'd mentioned the case of the missing spoke, and how I'd projected back to perceive that which I had not been conscious of.

REMINDING myself that it was past, I went through it again, deliberately. The fallen limb that blocked the road, my own horror as the wheels hit it. The struggle to regain control of the careening car.

As a man watching a motion picture, I watched the sky and the earth turn over and over, and I heard my voice shouting in wordless shouts of fear. Catherine's cry of pain and fright came, and I listened as my mind reconstructed it this time without wincing and shut-

ting the memory off.

Then the final crash, the horrid wave of pain and the sear of the flash-fire. I went through my own horror and self condemnation, and my concern over Catherine. I didn't shut it off. I waded through it.

Now I remembered something else.

Something that any normal, sensible mind would reject as an hallucination. Beyond any shadow of a doubt there had been no chance at all for a man to rig a block and tackle on a tree above a burning automobile in time to get the trapped victims out alive. And even more certain was it that no normal man of fifty would have had enough strength to lift a car by its front bumper while his son made a rush into the flames.

That tackle had been rigged and burned afterward. But who would reject a block and tackle in favor of an impossibly strong man? No, with the tackle in sight, the recollection of a man lifting that overturned automobile like a weight lifter pressing up a bar bell would be buried in any mind as a rank hallucination.

Then one more item came driving home hard. So hard that I almost jumped when the idea crossed my mind.

Both Catherine and Dr. Thorndyke had been telepaths.

A telepath close to any member

of this underground outfit would divine their purpose, come to know their organization, and begin to grasp the fundamentals of their program. Such a person would be dangerous.

On the other hand, an esper such as myself could be turned aside with bland remarks and a convincing attitude. I knew that I had no way of telling lie from truth and that made my problem a lot more difficult.

From the facts that I did have, something smelled of overripe seafood. Government and charities were pouring scads of dough into a joint called the Medical Research Center; to hear the scholars of medicine tell it, Mekstrom's Disease was about the last human frailty that hadn't been licked to a stand-still. They boasted that if a victim of practically anything, even with complications of two or more at the same time had enough life left in him to crawl to a telephone and use it, his life could be saved. They grafted well. I'd heard tales of things like fingers, and I know they were experimenting on hands, arms and legs with some degree of success. But when it came to Mekstrom's they were stopped cold. Therefore the Medical Research Center received a wallop of money for that alone; all the money that used to go to the various heart, lung, spine and can-

cer funds. It added up well.

But the Medical Research Center seemed unaware that some group had solved their basic problem.

From the books I've read I am well aware of one of the fundamental principles of running an underground: *Keep it underground!* The Commie menace in these United States might have won out in the middle of the century if they'd been able to stay a secret organization. So the Highways in Hiding could stay underground and be an efficient organization only until someone smoked them out.

That one was going to be me.

But I needed an aide-de-camp. Especially and specifically I needed a trained telepath, one who would listen to my tale and not instantly howl for the nut-hatch attendants. The F. B. I. were all trained investigators and they used esper-telepath teams all the time. One dug the joint while the other dug the inhabitant, which covered the situation to a fare-thee-well.

IT would take time to come up with a possible helper. So I spent the next hour driving toward Chicago, but by the time I'd crossed the Ohio-Indiana line and hit Richmond, I had a plan laid out. I placed a call to New York and within a few minutes I was talking to Nurse Farrow.

I'll not go into detail because there was a lot of mish-mash that is not particularly interesting and a lot more that covered my tracks since I'd parted company with her on the steps of the hospital. I did not, of course, mention my real purpose over the telephone and Miss Farrow could not read my mind from New York.

The upshot of the deal was that I felt that I needed a nurse for a while, not that I was ill, but that I felt a bit woozy now and then because I hadn't learned to slow down. I worked too fast and too long and my condition was not up to it yet. This Miss Farrow allowed as being quite possible. Yet she did not feel that she should take on a job like this—

I repeated my offer to pay her at the going prices for registered nurses with a one-month guarantee, paid in advance. That softened her quite a bit. Then I added that I'd videograph her a check large enough to cover the works plus a round trip ticket. She could come out and have a look, and if she weren't satisfied, she could return without digging into her own pocket. All she'd lose was one day, and it might be a bit of a vacation if she enjoyed flying in a jetliner at sixty-thousand feet.

The accumulation of offers finally sold her and she agreed to arrange a leave of absence. She'd

meet me in the morning of the day-after-tomorrow, at Central Airport in Chicago.

I videographed the check and then took off again, confident that I'd be able to convince her, that I'd be able to sell her on the idea of being the telepath half of my amateur investigation team.

Then because I needed some direct information, I turned West and crossed the line into Indiana, heading toward Marion. So far I had a lot of well-placed suspicions, but until I was certain, I could do no more than postulate ideas. I had to know definitely how to identify Mekstrom's Disease, or at least the infected flesh. I have a fairly good recall; all I needed now was to have someone point to a Case and say flatly that this was a case of Mekstrom's Disease. Then I'd know whether what I'd seen in Ohio was actually a case of one hundred percent Mekstrom.

CHAPTER VI

I walked into the front office with a lot of self-assurance. The Medical Center was a big, rambling place with a lot of spread-out one and two story buildings that looked so much like "Hospital" that no one in the world would have mistaken them for anything else. The main building was by the road, the rest spread out behind as far as I

could see, and beyond my esper range even though the whole business was set in one of the clearest psi areas that I'd ever been in.

I was only mildly worried about telepaths. In the first place, the only thing I had to hide was my conviction about a secret organization and how part of it functioned. In the second place, the chances were good that few, if any, telepaths were working there, if the case of Dr. Thorndyke carried any weight. That there were some telepaths, I did not doubt, but these would be among the high-powered help.

So I sailed in and faced the receptionist, who was a good-looking, chemical-type blonde with a pale skin, lovely complexion and figure to match. She greeted me with a glacial calm and asked my business.

Brazenly, I lied. "I'm a freelance writer and I'm looking for material."

"Have you an assignment?" she asked without a trace of interest in the answer.

"Not this time. I'm strictly freelance. I like it better this way because I can write whatever I like."

Her glacial air melted a bit at the inference that my writing had not been in vain. "Where have you been published?" she asked.

I made a fast stab in the dark, aiming in a direction that looked

safe. "Last article was one on the latest archeological findings in Assyria. Got my source material direct from the Oriental Institute in Chicago."

"Too bad I missed it," she said, looking regretful. I had to grin. I'd carefully avoided giving the name of the "publication" and the supposed date. She went on, "I suppose you would not be happy with with the usual press release?"

"Handouts contain material, all right, but they're so confounded trite and impersonal. People prefer to read anecdotes about the people rather than a listing of facts and figures."

She nodded at that. "Just a moment," she said. Then she addressed her telephone in a voice that I couldn't hear. When she finished, she smiled in a warmish-type manner as if to indicate that she'd gone all out in my behalf and that I'd be a heel to forget it. I nodded back and tried to match the toothpaste smile. Then the door opened and a man came in briskly.

He was a tall man, as straight as a ramrod, with a firm jaw and a close-clipped moustache. He had an air like a thin-man's Captain Bligh. When he spoke, his voice was as clipped and precise as his moustache; in fact it was so precise that it seemed almost mechanical.

"I am Dr. Lyon Sprague," he clipped. "What may I do for you."

"I'm Steve Cornell," I said. "I'm here after source material for a magazine article about Mekstrom's Disease. I'd prefer not to take my material from a handout."

"Do you hope to get more?" he demanded.

"I usually do. I've seen your handouts; I could get as much by taking last year's medical encyclopedia. Far too dry, too uninteresting, too impersonal."

"Just exactly what do you have in mind?"

I eyed him with speculation. Here was not a man who would take kindly to some imaginative conjecture. So Dr. Lyon Sprague was not the man I'd like to talk to. With an inward smile, I said, "I have a rather new idea about Mekstrom's that I'd like to discuss with the right party."

He looked down at me, although our eyes were on the same level. "I doubt that any layman could possibly come up with an idea that has not been most thoroughly discussed here among the research staff."

"In cold words you feel that no untrained lunk has a right to have ideas."

He froze. "I did not say that."

"You implied, at least, that suggestions from outsiders were not welcome. I can begin to understand why the Medical Center has failed to get anywhere with Mekstrom's

in the past twenty years."

"What do you mean?" he snapped.

"Merely that it is the duty of all scientists to listen to every suggestion and to discard it only after it has been shown wrong."

"Such as—?" he said coldly, with a curl of his eyebrows.

"Well, just for instance, suppose some way were found to keep a victim alive during the vital period, so that he would end up a complete Mekstrom Human."

"The idea is utterly fantastic. We have no time for such idle speculation. There is too much foggy thinking in the world already, why only last week we had a Velikovsky Adherent tell us that Mekstrom's had been predicted in the Bible. There are still people reporting flying saucers, you know. We have no time for foolish notions or utter nonsense."

"May I quote you?"

"Of course not," he snapped stiffly. "I'm merely pointing out that non-medical persons cannot have the grasp—"

The door opened again and a second man entered. The new arrival had pleasant blue eyes, a van dyke beard, and a goodnatured air of self-confidence and competence. "May I cut in?" he asked Dr. Sprague.

"Certainly. Mr. Cornell, this is Scholar Phelps, Director of the

Center. Scholar Phelps, this is Mr. Steve Cornell, a gentleman of the press," he added in a tone of voice that made the identification a sort of nasty name. "Mr. Cornell has an odd theory about Mekstrom's Disease that he intends to publish unless we can convince him that it is not possible."

"Odd theory?" asked Scholar Phelps with some interest. "Well, if Mr. Cornell can come up with something new, I'll be most happy to hear him out."

Dr. Lyon Sprague decamped with alacrity. Scholar Phelps smiled after him, then turned to me and said, "Dr. Sprague is a diligent worker, businesslike and well-informed, but he lacks the imagination and the sense of humor that makes a man brilliant in research. Unfortunately Dr. Sprague cannot abide anything that is not laid out as neat as an interlocking tile floor. Now, Mr. Cornell, how about this theory of yours?"

"First," I replied, "I'd like to know how come you turn up in the nick of time."

He laughed good-naturedly. "We always send Dr. Sprague out to interview visitors. If the visitor can be turned away easily, all is well and quiet. Dr. Sprague can do the job with ease. But if the visitor, like yourself, Mr. Cornell, proposes something that distresses the good Dr. Sprague and will not be loft-

ily dismissed, Dr. Sprague's blood pressure goes up. We all keep a bit of esper on his nervous system and when the blow-point approaches, we come out and effect a double rescue."

I laughed with him. Apparently the Medical Center staff enjoyed needling Dr. Sprague. "Scholar Phelps, before I get into my theory, I'd like to know more about Mekstrom's Disease. I may not be able to use it in my article, but any background material works well with any writer of fact articles."

"You're quite right. What would you like to know?"

"I've heard, too many times, that no one knows anything at all about Mekstrom's. This is unbelievable, considering that you folks have been working on it for some twenty years."

He nodded. "We know some, but it's precious little."

"It seems to me, that you could analyze the flesh—"

He smiled. "We have. The state of analytical chemistry is well advanced. We could, I think, take a dry scraping out of the cauldron used by MacBeth's witches, and determine whether Shakespeare had reported the formula correctly. Now, young man, if you think that something is added to the human flesh to make it Mekstrom's Flesh, you are wrong. Standard analysis

shows that the flesh is composed of exactly the same chemicals that normal flesh contains, in the same proportion. Nothing is added, as in the case of calcification, for instance."

"Then what is the difference?"

"The difference lies in the structure. By X-ray crystallographic methods, we have determined that Mekstrom's Flesh is a microcrystalline formation, interlocked tightly." Scholar Phelps looked at me thoughtfully. "Do you know much about crystallography?"

As a mechanical engineer I did, but as a writer of magazine articles I felt that I should profess some ignorance, so I merely said that I knew a little about the subject.

"Well, Mr. Cornell, you may know that in the field of solid geometry there are only five regular polyhedrons that are possible. Like the laws of topology that state that no more than four colors need be used to print a map on a flat surface, or that no more than seven colors are required to separate patches on a toroid, the laws of solid geometry prove that no more than five regular polyhedrons are possible. Now in crystallography there are only thirty-two possible classes of crystal lattice construction. Of these only thirty have ever been discovered in nature. Yet we know how the other two are constructed, or rather, we know how

they would appear if they did emerge in natural formation. Did you know this?"

I knew it all right but I shook my head and made scribbles on my notebook as if the idea were of interest. Scholar Phelps waited patiently until I'd made the notation.

"Now, Mr. Cornell, here comes the shock. Mekstrom's Flesh is one of the other two classes."

This was news to me and I blinked.

Then his face faded into a solemn expression. "Unfortunately," he said in a low voice, "knowing how a crystal should form does not help us much in forming one to that class. We have no real control over the arrangement of atoms in a crystal lattice. We can prevent the crystal formation, we can control the size of the crystal as it forms. But we cannot change the crystal into some other class."

"I suppose it's sort of like baking a cake. Once the ingredients are mixed, the cake can be big or small or shaped to fit the pan, or you can spoil it completely. But if you mix devil's food, it either comes out devil's food, or nothing."

"An amusing analogy and rather correct. However I prefer the one used years ago by Dr. Willy Ley, who observed that analysis is fine, but you can't learn how a locomotive is built by melting it down and

analyzing the mess."

Then he went on again. "To get back to Mekstrom's Disease and what we know about it. We know that the crawl goes at about a sixty-fourth of an inch per hour. If, for instance, you turned up here with a trace on your right middle finger, the entire first joint would be Mekstrom's Flesh in approximately three days. Within two weeks your entire middle finger would be solid. Without anaesthesia we could take a diamond saw and cut off a bit for our research."

"No feeling?"

"None whatever. The joints knit together, the arteries become as hard as steel tubing and the heart cannot function properly—not that the heart cares about minor conditions such as the arteries in the extremities, but as the Mekstrom infection crawls up the arm toward the shoulder the larger arteries become solid and then the heart cannot drive the blood through them in its accustomed fashion. It gets like an advanced case of arteriosclerosis. Eventually the infection reaches and immobilizes the shoulder; this takes about ninety days. By this time, the other extremities have also become infected and the crawl is coming up all four limbs."

HE looked at me very solemnly at that. "The rest is not

pretty. Death comes shortly after that. I can almost say that he is blessed who catches Mekstrom's in the left hand for then the infection reaches the heart before it reaches other parts. Those whose initial infection is in the toes are particularly cursed, because the infection reaches the lower parts of the body. I believe you can imagine the result, elimination is prevented because of the stoppage of peristalsis. Death comes of autointoxication, which is slow and painful."

I shuddered at the idea. The thought of death has always bothered me. The idea of looking at a hand and knowing that I was going to die by the calendar seemed particularly horrible.

Great discoveries and useful inventions do not, contrary to the stories, emerge from some genius working alone in a cellar. They come only after a lot of bright people have been working on allied problems for a long time, making minor contributions that all add up to a major work. This opinion of mine has often been disputed by my friends, but up to date nobody has come up with a case that I haven't been able to defend on my grounds.

What I am leading up to is this: Since the Medical Center did not know how to control Mekstrom's Disease, it stood to reason that the Highways in Hiding was an organ-

ization far larger, more efficient and better equipped. Any outfit that could run a nation-wide network of highways and way stations was no small potato.

Taking the bit between my teeth, I said, "Scholar Phelps, I've been wondering whether you and your Center have ever considered treating Mekstrom's by helping it?"

"Helping it?" he asked.

"Sure. Consider what a man might be if he were Mekstrom's all the way through."

He nodded. "You would have a physical superman," he said. "Steel-strong muscles driving steel-hard flesh covered by a near impenetrable skin. Perhaps such a man would be free of all minor pains and ills. Imagine a normal bacterium trying to bore into flesh as hard as concrete. Mekstrom's Flesh tends to be acid-resistant as well as tough physically. It is not beyond the imagination to believe that your Mekstrom Superman might live three times our frail four-score and ten. But—"

Here he paused.

"Not to pull down your house of cards, this idea is not a new one. Some years ago we invited a brilliant young doctor here to study for his scholarate. The unfortunate fellow arrived with first traces of Mekstrom's in his right middle toe. We placed about a hundred of our most brilliant researchers un-

der his guidance, and he decided to take this particular angle of study. He failed; for all his efforts, he did not stay his death by a single hour. From that time to the present we have maintained one group on this part of the problem."

It occurred to me at that moment that if I turned up with a trace of Mekstrom's I'd be seeking out the Highways in Hiding rather than the Medical Center. That fast thought brought a second: Suppose that Dr. Thorndyke learned that he had a trace, or rather, the Highways found it out. What better way to augment their medical staff than to approach the victim with a proposition: You help us, work for and with us, and we will save your life.

That, of course, led to the next idea: That if the Highways in Hiding had any honest motive, they'd not be hidden in the first place and they'd have taken their cure to the Medical Center in the second. Well, I had a bit of something listed against them, so I decided to let my bombshell drop.

"Scholar Phelps," I said quietly, "one of the reasons I am here is that I have fairly good evidence that the cure for Mekstrom's Disease does exist, and that it produces people of ultra-hard bodies and superhuman strength."

HE smiled at me with the same tolerant air that father uses on

the offspring who comes up with one of the standard juvenile plans for perpetual motion.

"What do you consider good evidence?"

"Suppose I claimed to have seen it myself."

"Then I would say that you had misinterpreted your evidence," he replied calmly. "The flying saucer enthusiasts still insist that the things they see are piloted by little green men from Venus, even though we have been there and found Venus to be absolutely uninhabited by anything higher than slugs, grubs, and little globby animals sort of like Tellurian leeches."

"But—"

"This, too, is an old story," he told me with a whimsical smile. "It goes in the standard routine about a secret organization that is intending to take over the Earth. The outline has been popular ever since Charles Fort. Now—er—just tell me what you saw."

I concocted a tale that was about thirty-three percent true and the rest partly distorted. It covered my hitting a girl in Ohio with my car, hard enough to clobber her. But when I stopped to help her, she got up and ran away unhurt. She hadn't left a trace of blood although the front fender of the car was badly smashed.

He nodded solemnly. "Such things happen," he said. "The hu-

man body is really quite durable; now and then comes the lucky happenstance when the fearful accident does no more than raise a slight bruise. I've read the story of the man whose parachute did not open and who lived to return it to the factory in person, according to the old joke. But now, Mr. Cornell, have you ever considered the utter impossibility of running any sort of secret organization in this world of Today. Even before Rhine it was difficult. You'll be adding to your tale next—some sort of secret sign, maybe a form of fraternity grip, a nation, or perhaps even a world-wide system of local clubs and hangouts, all aimed at some dire purpose."

I squirmed nervously for a bit. Scholar Phelps was too close to the truth to make me like it, because he was scoffing. He went right on making me nervous.

"Now before we get too deep, I only want to ask about the probable motives of such an organization. You grant them superhuman strength, perhaps extreme longevity. If they wanted to take over the Earth, couldn't they do it by a show of force? Or are they mild-mannered supermen, only quietly interested in overrunning the human race and waiting out the inevitable decline of normal homo sapiens? You're not endowing them with an extraterrestrial origin, are you?"

I shook my head unhappily.

"Good. That shows some logic, Mr. Cornell. After all, we know now that while we could live on Mars or Venus with a lot of home-sent aid, we'd be most uncomfortable there. We could not live a minute on any planet of our solar system without artificial help."

"I might point out that our hypothetical superman might be able to stand a lot of rough treatment," I blurted.

"Oh, this I'll grant if your tale held any water at all. But let's forget this fruitless conjecture and take a look at the utter impossibility of running such an organization. Even planting all of their secret hangouts in dead areas and never going into urban centers, they'd still find some telepath or esper on their trail. Perhaps a team. Let's go back a step and consider, even without psi training, how long such an outfit could function. It would run until the first specimen had an automobile accident on, say, Times Square; or until one of them walked—or ran—out of the fire following a jet-liner crash."

He then speared me with a cold eye. "Write it as fiction, Mr. Cornell. But leave my name out of it. I thought you were after facts."

"I am. But the better fact articles always use a bit of speculation to liven it up."

"Well," he grunted, "one such fanciful suggestion is the possibility of such an underground outfit being able to develop a 'cure' while we cannot. We, who have had the best of brains and money for twenty years."

I nodded, and while I did not agree with Phelps, I knew that to insist was to insult him to his face, and get myself tossed out.

"You do seem to have quite a set-up here," I said, offhand.

At this point Phelps offered to show me around the place, and I accepted. Medical Center was far larger than I had believed at first; it spread beyond my esper range into the hills beyond the main plant. The buildings were arranged in a haphazard-looking pattern out in the back section; I say 'looking' because only a psi-trained person can dig a pattern. The wide-open psi area did not extend for miles. Behind the main buildings it closed down into the usual mottled pattern and the medical buildings had been placed in the open areas. Dwellings and dormitories were in the dark places. A nice set-up.

I did not meet any of the patients, but Phelps let me stand in the corridor outside a couple of rooms and use my esper on the flesh. It was both distressing and instructive.

He explained, "The usual thing

The Long Way Home

by

Mack Reynolds

Chances were they would never see Earth again, so they had a choice; share the wealth of the ship's stores—or dream of a fat bonus!

CONSUL John Covington Reece said, "Robert, in many respects you remind me of your mother. You are excessively romantic, and excessively stupid."

Bob Reece flushed his resentment and shot a quick glance in the direction of Forbes, but didn't answer. The thin face of the servile Forbes betrayed no indication of having heard; he continued to remove the dishes and utensils.

The older man said, "Forbes, we shall have our coffee and the Courvoisier in here. Then get out."

"Very good, sir," Forbes murmured.

When the brandy had been served, the interplanetary bureaucrat poured a generous two ounces in a snifter glass and swirled it around easily until the bouquet permeated the air. "Wonderful," he breathed, and then, to his son, "You haven't

taken any cognac."

"I don't think I want any."

"Of course you want brandy after your dinner, Robert. A cultivated person appreciates the niceties and among them are the culinary arts and the appropriate potables accompanying a good table."

"Very well, father." The nineteen year old poured half an ounce into his own glass and took it up lackadaisically.

John Reece sipped his drink. "Now then," he said, "this fantastic desire of yours to spend your life as a common spaceman."

"That wasn't exactly what I said, Father. My ambitions . . ."

"Don't interrupt me, Robert," John Reece said. "The point is that you are the son of. . ." here he made a gesture of self-depreciation ". . .one of the most powerful men in the Galactic League. Your duty is manifest. When you



are of age, we shall begin to take the steps necessary to make you, in turn, a power in the party. At this stage you must prepare for that day."

"But, Father, I haven't any tendency toward politics. If I attend the Space Academy I . . ."

"Will you be quiet long enough

for me to drum a modicum of common sense into your confounded head?"

Forbes reentered the salon and stood near the door until noticed. John Reece spun about in his chair. "Well?" he snapped. "Didn't I tell you to get out?"

Forbes bobbed and whined,

"Consul, the Captain wishes to speak to you."

Before he could go further, the door opened again and the bulk of Captain Warren Martin overshadowed that of the diminutive steward.

The politician said to him coldly, "What is the meaning of this intrusion, Captain? Are my quarters to be entered and I to be inconvenienced at the whim of half-baked and incompetent employees?"

Warren Martin was every inch the space yacht skipper. With the experience of twenty years in the fleet behind him, and the dignity of a man who has commanded a score of vessels ably, he radiated the distinction persons of affluence seek in their ship's masters.

His voice was steady, as always. "We're going to have to make an emergency landing, Consul. You'd best prepare yourselves immediately."

"Emergency landing! Are you quite insane?"

"No, Sir." Captain Martin kept his face expressionless; there was a pension coming up and this was his last cruise. For the first time in his life, he couldn't afford candor, but he couldn't refrain from saying bitingly, "Evidently your political opponents are somewhat lacking in ethics—if there is any such thing anymore. This yacht has been sabotaged; two of our fuel bunkers

contain nothing but lead."

John Covington Reece came to his feet, knocking his chair over backward. His face flushed and he threw his napkin passionately to the table. "What *is* this nonsense?"

"I'm afraid it isn't nonsense, Consul. We refueled on Aldeberan IV, supposedly picking up three bunkers of neo-plutonium. It's only by the rarest of chance that we happened to be within range of an habitable planet. Mr. Dawes is now attempting to stretch our fuel to the point where we can make a successful landing."

"*Dillingham*," Reece snarled. "It must have been Dillingham. That corrupt, mealy-mouthed reformer would go to any lengths to get me out of the way."

"Obviously," Captain Martin said, risking the faintest of sarcasm. "And now if you and your son will return to your quarters for deceleration, Consul, I'll see that the balance of the company is warned."

THREE hours later, twenty persons stood beside the space yacht and looked out over the planet which had loomed before them at the crucial moment to give them refuge.

"It could almost be part of Terra," Bob Reece said, relief in his voice.

His father snorted and turned

sharply on the captain. "How in the world did you know this forsaken hole was habitable, Martin?"

Captain Warren Martin turned from his slow and critical appraising of their asylum. "Our fortune in making it to *any* planet, Consul, is almost unbelievable. Our further fortune in being near a sanctuary that offers us breathable air, not to mention vegetation that is possibly edible, is almost mathematically impossible. If I were a superstitious man I would suggest we all get down on our knees and thank some deity."

The elderly spaceman turned and indicated his first officer. "As it is, might be more in order to thank Mr. Dawes. By coincidence, he has touched this planet before, and it was he who brought us through."

Mike Dawes grinned over at them. He was a genial, lanky specimen, still with an air of efficiency. "Never thought I'd see it again," he said. "Certainly not under these conditions."

Consul John Reece scowled at the second in command of his yacht. "I don't understand."

Dawes explained. "I was here with the *New Frisco*, one of the Galactic Exploratory Fleet. We were here on Michael for almost two weeks."

"Michael?"

Mike Dawes said, "You'd be

amused at the methods sometimes used to find names for newly discovered planets, Consul. The uninhabitable ones, of course, we just number, but we try to find names for those that might eventually become colonies." His voice was reminiscent. "I was only a messman at the time but when I discovered that the streams here contain edible fish the crew of the *New Frisco* unanimously petitioned the skipper to name this planet in my honor."

"Ridiculous!"

Dawes grinned again. "You wouldn't have thought so, Consul, if you hadn't had fresh meat or fish for a period of more than two years."

John Covington Reece scowled at him. "I don't believe I appreciate your attitude, young man. In the future I shall expect an absense of flippancy in your conversation."

The grin was gone from Mike Dawes' face. He turned and pointed out into the wide stretches of space. "Earth is over there," he said quietly, "but so far away that even if we had fuel it would take us months at ultra-speed. And do you know when this planet is scheduled to be visited again by the Galactic Exploratory Fleet?"

"When?" Bob Reece blurted.

"Never, Bob," Mike Dawes said, looking full into the face of the boy's father. "The planet Michael is charted as an habitable world

suitable for colonization but there are more than thirty-three thousand similar planets nearer to the solar system. So you see, Consul, our relationship here is somewhat different than if we were on Terra or anywhere else in touch with civilization."

The crew had gathered around them.

Bill Cassidy, jetman, cleared his throat. "What does it boil down to Mr. Dawes?"

The face of the first officer was coldly serious now. He looked out at the long stretches of meadows with the hills and forests beyond. "We're lucky to have found so suitable a spot to be Robinson Crusoes. We're going to be here a *long* time."

JOHN Covington Reece turned and began to push his plump body through the others to make his way back to his space yacht. "Come along, Robert," he growled. Then to the captain, "Please come to my quarters Captain Martin, obviously certain plans have to be made."

The circle of crew members made way for the bureaucrat almost grudgingly, and the captain made no motion to follow him. Their eyes were on Mike Dawes. Hilton, the second cook, said, "We going to be able to live here until we're rescued, Mr. Dawes? I gotta wife and three kids back at the

Mars colony."

Dawes looked at the little man. "There's no use trying to kid ourselves," he said, "It's going to be hard, but we can probably stay alive indefinitely if we do things right. We might even rig up some sort of signal that would bring in a ship if one got within reasonable distance."

Consul John Reece had been halfway back to the yacht, but he spun on his heel at that. He rapped, "In a matter of days there'll be a score of ships out looking for me. Do you think I am of no more importance than some space bum in a tramp freighter?"

Mike Dawes began to answer, then closed his mouth and looked at the skipper.

Captain Martin cleared his throat. "You'll remember, Consul, that it was by your own suggestion that we switched courses last week. I'm afraid any rescue craft would be at quite a disadvantage."

The politician scowled. "Then we'll immediately begin sending messages requesting succor. I can't stay on this desolate speck of dirt forever."

The voice of the youthful Sparks was faraway, as though he hadn't been following the conversation of the others. He said, "Our equipment won't reach out any distance that'd count. The only ships that carry sets that would do any good

in our spot are military ones. We could receive *their* messages but we couldn't get anything off to them." He squinted up at Mike Dawes. "How did you figure on getting a signal out, Mr. Dawes."

The first officer shrugged. "We could stand a twenty-four hour watch on your receiver. As soon as we picked up a ship which we figured was within reasonable range we could. . . ."

"We could do what?" the twenty-year-old signalman said scornfully. "Set off a bonfire which could be seen a few light years away?"

Dawes grinned at him. "That's almost it. We have enough fuel left to make up one or two king-size fission bombs. If and when a ship gets near enough for us to pick up on your set, we can send a lifeboat out into space with a bomb. It's explosion just *might* attract their attention; they might pick it up on one detector or another."

Sparks stared at him unblinkingly. "Pretty slim chances, Mr. Dawes, but maybe you're right at that. There's nothing else."

Captain Warren Martin's shoulders straightened and a glimmer of hope came into his eyes. "It sounds possible, Mr. Dawes. We'll begin to. . . ."

"Just a moment here," Consul Reece said coldly. "Do I understand that you contemplate removing what little fuel we have left

in order to construct a signal that has one chance in a thousand of ever being seen?"

Captain Martin said, "The odds should be somewhat better than that, Consul."

"And have you considered the fact that if the ship's fuel is removed I shall have neither lights, heat, refrigeration nor suitable cooking facilities?"

There was an audible growl from the crew. Cassidy, the jetman, rumbled, "We're in this up to our necks, Consul Reece. It's too bad if your comfort might have to be sacrificed some, but it's a matter of us sticking together now or we'll none of us ever see home again. I think Mr. Dawes' plan ought to be"

THE bureaucrat's hand went up to silence the crew member and his small mouth tightened. He ran his glance over them one at a time.

"Let us have this straight, here and now. This is my yacht and you're its crew. I want continued obedience of the type I've always insisted upon. Disillusion yourselves about our doing any sacrificing together."

He wheeled on the captain. "If it is true that we might of necessity pass some time on this planet, we'd best watch my stores. Immediately delegate some of the crew

to forage food for everyone except my son and me. We shall continue to subsist on the ship's provisions."

The growl was more audible now.

The politician's voice went high with anger. "Listen, every one of you. We might get back to the solar system in a minimum of time, or it might take years, although that seems ridiculous. But whatever it is, remember that you are on my payroll. During the time we are here on *Michael* . . ." he sneered the word, ". . . your pay is doubled. If I have any trouble with any of you, officers or men, you're fired, and when you return to Terra you'll be not only penniless but I might even consider charges of mutiny."

"If we return home," First Officer Mike Dawes said softly.

John Covington Reece pointed a finger at the officer. "You, Dawes, may be in charge of foraging food. You seem to have won fame at one time in finding the local fish edible. Possibly you will gain still more renown in this capacity."

Mike Dawes looked about at the rest. "Is this the way you want it?" he asked.

They were silent. A truculent silence.

Sparks muttered. "Double pay is double pay, and nobody wants Reece down on their necks when we get home."

Mike Dawes smiled grimly. "No one seems to understand that it's *if* we get home, not *when*." He turned back to the yacht's owner. The majority seem to think you're right, Consul. I'll immediately take measures to see what the planet offers in the way of food."

"Forget about what the majority thinks, Dawes. I make the decisions here."

Young Bob Reece wet his lips hesitantly and said, "I think I could eat what everybody else does. I don't see any reason why we all . . ."

"Shut up," his father said. "As usual, you're mouthing nonsense. Captain, let us return to the ship, we'll have to make plans to increase the size of our quarters if we are to be here any length of time. Perhaps we could convert the crew's mess to a recreation room, for instance."

MIKE Dawes stood on a crest of hill almost a mile from the grounded space yacht. He was looking pensively out over the valley that sheltered their small community and at the fields which made up their agricultural attempts. To the other side of the hill were long stretches of rolling, prairie-like land spotted here and there with herbivorous animals. He rubbed the tip of his nose, wondering about the possibility of domes-

ticating one or more of the various species.

He doubted that they'd find anything comparable to the cow or even the goat, but of them all it might be possible to locate one of the herding animals that could provide both milk and meat.

They'd need it this coming season.

Two figures were making their way up from the settlement. As they drew nearer he could make out two jetmen, one of them was Cassidy, the other a burly giant named Ross.

He grinned at them as they got nearer. "Ah, the mighty hunters," he said. "What'd'ya have there, Bill?" He indicated the queer contraption the other carried, part metal, part wood.

Cassidy said ruefully, "It's supposed to be a crossbow. Bob Reece found a picture and article about them in the encyclopedia. Used them before they discovered gunpowder, back on Earth. They aren't too bad. I got one of them little rabbit-like animals with it an hour ago."

Mike Dawes scowled. "What happened to your stun gun?"

"Out of power-ammunition, Mike."

"Out of ammunition! Good grief, Bill, didn't I tell you to take it easy with the stun-guns? I was hoping to use them to capture a few speci-

mens of those animals down there."

The jetman shrugged. "Old man Reece developed a yen for the meat of those little birds that are so hard to hit. It takes two or three dozen charges to get even one of them."

Mike Dawes looked from Cassidy to Ross. "You mean all the hunters are out of ammunition?" He didn't wait for an answer, he knew the answer.

Instead, he said softly. "What happened to the petition to Reece asking permission for the whole crew to spend the winter months within the ship?"

Ross growled, "Why ask? And now he wants two more of the men to act as servants for him and Bob."

There was a tic in the first officer's eye. They couldn't spare the manpower. Didn't the old fool realize this? If they were going to survive, they had to utilize the labor and special training of every man. They just couldn't afford to have eight of the crew continually spending their time waiting on the petulant needs of Consul Reece.

Cassidy was saying, "Bob Reece used to be a pretty nice kid, but his old man's been drilling away so steady some of it's beginning to wear off. I'm getting to the point where I'd just as well have that stool-pigeon of a steward, Forbes, around."

"Yeah," Ross said. "You know

what happened to all them grapes Davis and Coti cultivated? Young Reece had 'em all squeezed up to see if he could make wine. And I hear the old man is going to take some of our cereal crops and see if he can distill whiskey."

Mike turned and looked back at the herds in the distance again. "Somewhere along here we're going to have to draw the line," he told them softly.

"Why don't you have it out with Reece, Mike?" Cassidy urged. "You're the only guy with us that could see this thing through; you've had years working for the exploration outfits. You know the ropes."

Mike Dawes looked at him unseeingly. "You should have thought of that almost two years ago, Bill. Consul Reece pointed out that the majority means nothing here, but actually it does. When we first landed the proposition was put to you and you cast your vote for him. All, right. I'm going with the majority. When the majority gets fed up, maybe there'll be a change."

Cassidy looked away. He said, "I didn't have no idea we was going to be here for this long."

Ross growled. "We need the change now. But, come on, guys, let's get back to the mess hall, it's nearly time for chow."

"You call that chow?" Cassidy

sneered. But he trudged along.

THERE were only remnants of rags now. Consul Reece, the first month of their stay, had had the foresight to confiscate the ship's stores of clothing at the same time he'd taken over the tobacco, liquor, soap and all the other essentials that make the difference between comfort and animal existence.

The clothing of the crew consisted principally of the crudely tanned skins of animals they'd been successful in killing. They were sufficient in the warm months, but painfully inadequate in the long cold ones.

Now, three of them, Mike Dawes, Sparks and Cassidy, entered the space yacht the first time in many months for any of them. It seemed almost strange to be within the confines of titanium alloy walls again.

They strode to the salon and Mike Dawes hesitated momentarily, then knocked.

A voice from within called, "Yes, confound it, what is the meaning of this intrusion?"

The smile on Dawes' face was wry. "Come on boys," he said. He opened the door and stepped inside. The room was occupied by John and Bob Reece, Forbes and Captain Warren Martin, the only members of the yacht's company that

Reece had continued to allow to remain aboard.

Forbes had been serving drinks, his face as cringing as ever. Evidently, the captain had been making some sort of report. Bob Reece was already sloppily drunk.

John Covington Reece had changed but little in his years on Michael. If anything he was plumper; his stone face still demanded obedience; his presence dominated the scene—as always.

He said now, "I assume, Dawes, that you have some excuse for this cavalier invasion of my privacy?"

Mike Dawes said carefully, "We three represent the crew and have been sent as a delegation to make known some of the crew's decisions."

"Ah, decisions, eh?" Consul Reece said. "You have got around to make some decisions. Well—?"

Mike Dawes took a deep breath. "The conclusion is that if we are to survive, the resources available to us must be utilized in a more—well, universal manner."

John Reece shot a contemptuous glance at Captain Martin. "You hear this nonsense from the members of your crew, I assume, Captain."

Warren Martin didn't answer. He was an old man and there were lines of bitterness about his mouth; but if they ever returned to Earth, John Reece owed him twenty thou-

sand uranium credits which would mean security for Beth and the two children.

Mike Dawes continued. "Given the use of various equipment here on board, it would be possible for us to improve our standard of living considerably. For instance, it is the opinion of the crew that if the ship's medical stores had been available to all Morton and Shirey need not have died. If more extensive use of the ship's power and engine room facilities were available we could build tools and weapons that would enable us. . ."

John Reece held up a hand. "That will be enough, *Mister Dawes*. You, for one, are dismissed as first officer of this yacht. In the future, you will receive the pay of an ordinary spaceman. Any further agitation on your part will lead to dismissal. Now, you three return to the crew and inform them that their ridiculous petition is refused but that, however, I plan to award all personnel an additional thousand uranium credits for their faithfulness, upon our return."

Bob Reece giggled drunkenly.

Dawes smiled without humor. "This isn't a petition, Consul. There are eighteen men left of the original twenty that landed here. Eliminate yourself and your son and we have sixteen. Of these, fourteen of us have voted to change the present status. The eight per-

sons who have been devoting almost full time to your needs will be used at other tasks. All the facilities of the yacht will be available to the group as a whole. You and your son will have to do your share and contribute to the efforts of the community."

JOHN Reece's face had lost the contempt of a moment before. It assumed the granite lines known to a thousand crushed political opponents. He said to the Captain, "And your position in this contemptible effort to rob me of my property, Captain Martin?"

There was the money, the pension. The old man said slowly, "I refrained from voting, Consul Reece."

Forbes whined, "I voted against 'em, Consul Reece. I voted for *you*."

The cold eyes went to the steward. "I'm sure you did, Forbes, and your faithfulness will eventually be rewarded, but for now, shut up!"

"Yes, sir."

Back to Mike Dawes. "You're fired, Dawes. And I hereby instruct Captain Martin to place you under arrest on charges of incitation to mutiny."

Dawes shook his head. "It won't do, Reece. You've lost. Already you have the lives of two men on your hands. Two more are desper-

ately in need of medicine that you are reserving for your exclusive use. Two weeks ago, Sparks reported a military spaceship passed within a few million miles—had our fission bomb signal been available, we might have attracted its attention, but instead our supply of neo-plutonium is being used for your comfort." He shook his head again. "We're taking over, Reece."

Bob Reece sprawled drunkenly on the couch gurgled, "Comes the revolution."

His father stood for a long moment staring at the three crewmen. Finally, "Very well, I shall consider this an act of mutiny." He drew his hand from where it had rested easily in a jacket pocket. It held a short silo-gun.

Cassidy blurted, "You mean you had that gun all the time, when we could have used it for bringing down some of them big moose things?"

The face of Mike Dawes had tightened and the nervous tic in his eye intensified, but he shook his head. "It still won't wash, Reece. There are fourteen of us and only four of you, even if you count the skipper among your number. Actually, it's just *you* against all the rest." He walked toward the tycoon.

"No you won't. There are fourteen of us, Reece. The others could tear you apart." Mike Dawes

reached out suddenly and hit the other sharply across the wrist. The small gun tumbled from the politician's hand and skittered across the floor. Sparks and Forbes both darted for it.

The steward kicked out brashly, desperately, crushing the other's face as the signalman stooped, then snatched up the gun himself. His eyes shifted like a cornered rodent's.

"Give me that gun, Forbes," Mike Dawes commanded tightly, stepping forward.

"Shoot him, Forbes," John Reece snapped.

The gun spat twice, softly and without recoil, and Mike Dawes held his hands over his stomach. His eyes were unbelieving even as they went dull. He crumpled to the floor.

John Reece strode over and took the gun from the steward's hand and whirled on the others. "Casidy, Sparks," he rapped, "you may return to the crew and tell them that their ringleader has been shot for mutiny. Remind them also that when rescue does come, any future acts of mutiny will be reported to the authorities." He paused for a long moment, his eyes narrow. "And don't forget what I told Dawes. Upon our return, all faithful crew members will receive, in addition to their double pay, a thousand uranium credits as a special

bonus."

The two crewmen stumbled from the salon, Sparks holding his bleeding face in his hands and whimpering.

Reece turned to the captain who had slumped, gray faced, into a chair. "I suggest you make arrangements to dispose of the body of the mutineer, Captain Martin."

THE weeks passed and the months passed and the years. And Mike Dawes had been wrong after all, because the rescue did finally come.

It came in the early morning out of deep space and seven men stood watching in the small clearing while the space cruiser settled spectacularly to the ground and the pillar of fire upon which it had descended died away.

That they were rescuing the crew of a ship that had been marooned for many years must have been obvious. When the new craft's hatch opened several officers and crewmen issued forth to stare at the fields and at the rough log shacks that had been erected.

The older of the castaways, a man of perhaps seventy, snapped, "You've been a damned long time in coming!"

Captain Felix Keyhoe of the exploratory cruiser *New Reno* smiled. "And it isn't exactly a coincidence. This is obviously the

space yacht of, let's see, Mr. Reece, isn't it?"

"Consul Reece. Am I to assume then, that you have sought me all these years?" There was arrogant satisfaction in the old man's tone.

Captain Keyhoe said amiably, "Not exactly. But where are the rest?"

"Unfortunately, this is all of the ship's company that have survived. May I present my son, Robert Reece? And these are the five remaining members of the crew: Forbes, Cassidy, Hilton, Ross and Davidson."

The face of the rescue ship's commander went blank. "How about Mike Dawes? Mike and I were youngsters together in service thirty years ago. As a matter of fact, I'd known about his disappearance and often wondered if you hadn't gone off in this direction and if, when something went wrong, Dawes hadn't piloted you to Michael. I've come out of my way almost half a light year to check."

One of the other ship's officers spoke up. "As a matter of fact, when we got nearer and spotted that tremendous SOS burned in swatches through the nearby forests, we were sure it was Mike's work."

"Mike Dawes had us do it before his death," Cassidy said lowly.

"He died in an attempted mut-

iny," Reece snapped.

"Mutiny! *Mike Dawes?*"

There was a cold silence, then Captain Keyhoe said, "And just what happened to the Captain and the balance of the crew? Surely on a planet as hospitable as this—" He broke off without finishing his sentence.

"I am becoming weary of this cross examination," Reece rapped. "Some died of one thing, some another. Disease, accident, cold, malnutrition; all took their toll."

Robert Reece a slack mouthed, dissipated man of about forty, intoxicated even at this morning hour, grinned vacuously. "You ain't just a whistlin' *Terra Forever*. If these fellas hadn't come when they did, there wouldn't've been enough servants around for decent living."

Captain Keyhoe said slowly and with obvious restraint, "This is not my affair; undoubtedly there will be an investigation by the authorities. For one thing, I am unable to understand how a mutiny could take place while your craft was not in space. Once landed, the laws of space did not apply."

John Reece snorted. "Order some of your men to assist my crew in preparation for our departure, Captain. I am in a hurry to return to Terra."

His rescuer's eyes had been going over the immaculate dress of the politician and his son, the rags

and skins of the crewmen. He looked up at the other's words. "Sorry, it will be more than a year before we head back to the solar system. We're on an exploratory cruise; you'll just have to come along."

"Nonsense," Reece rapped. "I'm Consul John Covington Reece, can't you understand? I have the authority to commandeer this ship."

The eyebrows of the other went up questioningly.

"Listen," Reece snapped in irritation. "A consul, at will can . . ."

The Captain interrupted him, his smile cold. "Mr. Reece, you seem

to have forgotten that you have been gone twenty years. That is so long a time that it is almost difficult for me to remember the period when your administration was in power. Almost, but not quite. As I recall, the scandal that broke shortly after the disappearance shook the political foundations of the League. If I am not too mistaken. . . ." he hesitated here ". . . you were tried *in absentia* and all your property seized."

The seven stood silently, staring at their rescuers.

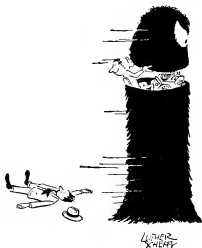
Bob Reece began to giggle.

THE END

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2



NO-RISK PLANET

by

Milton Lesser

Sam had sold life insurance to every race in the galaxy. But on Halcyon he found a people who not only didn't want it — but didn't need it!

Interstellar Hotel
Halcyon City
Halcyon

Mr. Herman Spottsworth
Interstellar Division
Terran Insurance Co.
Baltimore, Md., Earth

Dear Boss:

The natives got a big kick out of it when I told them what the name of their planet means in English. It means peaceful. From what I could gather, the first Terran to land here fifty years ago was so impressed with the balmy climate and pleasant rolling terrain and almost tideless oceans that he named the planet Halcyon. The only catch is, the natives have all the food they want and all the natural resources and just about everything. So, they have nothing to keep them occupied except fighting wars. They haven't been able to

string three peaceful years together since the beginning of recorded history here, two thousand years ago. It's kind of like a game with them.

That being the case, I ought to establish a new record for the Interstellar Division. I've got to sign off now because the air-raid bell just rang. Regards to Joanie.

Cordially,
Sammy Trumple

Interstellar Division
Terran Insurance Co.
Baltimore, Md., Earth

Mr. Sammy Trumple
Halcyon City
Halcyon

Dear Sammy:

Glad to see you've arrived O.K. and are so impressed with the sales potential there. Remember the motto of the Interstellar Divi-



sion: IF YOU CAN PLANET-
FALL, YOU CAN SELL . . .

Yours in sales,
Herman Spottsworth

P.S. Regards from Joanie.

Interstellar Hotel

Halcyon City
Halcyon

Mr. Herman Spottsworth
Etc.

Dear Boss:

That air-raid was murder! You'd

better double my own life insurance policy. Take the premiums out of my salary, please. Incidentally, your letter almost got lost because you forgot to include "Interstellar Hotel" in the address. It's a fifty-room fleabag, boss, but they got pride. Please take good care of Joanie.

Cordially,
Sammy Trumple

Interstellar Division
Terrain Insurance Co.
Baltimore, Md., Earth

Dear Sammy:

You've been on Halcyon three-weeks now. How come you wrote up no policies yet? You aren't taking the sights in like a tourist, are you—on a Terran expense account?

Yours in sales,
Herman Spottsworth.

143 $\frac{1}{4}$ East Scjuluk Street
Halcyon City
Halcyon

Dear Boss:

Please note the new address. The Interstellar Hotel was blown to bits in the last air-raid. I'm scared, boss. There are air-raids around the clock, with Halcyonians dropping off like flies.

And that answers your question, incidentally. There are no tourists on Halcyon. It's too dangerous.

Better quadruple my own life insurance policy. And tell Joan I love her.

Frantically,
Sammy Trumple

Interstellar Division
Terran Insurance Co.
Baltimore, Md., Earth

Dear Sammy:

I've quadrupled your policy. I'm taking care of Joanie. I'm awaiting your first sale.

Spottsworth

143 $\frac{1}{4}$ East Scjuluk Street
Halcyon City
Halcyon

Dear Boss:

I'm trying. I'm trying my head off. With those big premiums to pay, don't you think I could use the commission?

There's something fishy going on here on Halcyon, but I can't figure it out yet. The way they get killed off in these wars, the Halcyonians ought to snap up insurance policies. In fact, I don't even know how much profit the Company could expect to make from them, but that's your department. It's funny, though. The Halcyonians don't want life insurance. They don't even know what life insurance is!

To give you an idea of what I mean, I'll quote verbatim a con-

versation I had with a couple of Halcyonians right after this morning's air-raid, which leveled every building on their block except their own.

ME: Good morning, folks. You're mighty lucky people, yes siree.

FIRST HALCYONIAN: Why are we lucky?

ME: You're the only survivors on your whole block.

SECOND HALCYONIAN (shrugging): So what?

ME: So what? So you could have been killed in that air-raid, that's what.

SECOND HALCYONIAN (shrugging again): So what?

ME: (tuning my language translator to its most cheerful pitch): I'm from the planet Earth. Did you ever hear of the planet Earth?

FIRST AND SECOND HALCYONIAN: No.

ME (hopefully): It's also called Terra. Near Sirius?

FIRST AND SECOND HALCYONIAN: No.

ME: Well, anyhow, I represent the Terran Insurance Company, Interstellar Division. I'm here on Halcyon to offer your loved ones financial protection from the ravages of war, via life insurance.

FIRST HALCYONIAN: Which insurance?

ME: Life insurance. The special,

triple indemnity war and disaster policy of the Terran Insurance Company.

FIRST HALCYONIAN: I never heard of life insurance. What does it do?

ME: I have here in my hand (this required some explanation, boss, because the Halcyonians do not have hands) a blank policy for you to look at. Life insurance, you see, pays a stipulated sum to a party of your designation in the event of your death. All you do is pay small yearly premiums, and ...

SECOND HALCYONIAN: Oh, like the fellow from Fomalhaut.

ME (gasping): What? There's another insurance salesman in my territory? Someone's poaching?

SECOND HALCYONIAN: He's been here some time now, but we couldn't possibly be interested.

ME: The Fomalhautian's policy offers you more?

FIRST HALCYONIAN: Really, we couldn't be less interested. But the answer to your question is no.

ME: Is he still here in Halcyon City?

SECOND HALCYONIAN: Who?

ME: The insurance salesman from Fomalhaut.

SECOND HALCYONIAN: I think so. His name, I believe, is Lar Luk. You could look him up in

the city register.

ME: I sure will. And thank you, folks.

FIRST HALCYONIAN: You're wasting your time, Mr. Terra.

ME: No, that's my planet. My name is Trumple.

FIRST HALCYONIAN: Well, Terra or whatever your name is, you won't sell any of those dohink-uses here.

Well, that's the conversation, boss. Half an hour later, the two Halcyonians got their breathing vents ruptured in the air-raid and died of strangulation. I'll bet you're glad I didn't sell *those* two policies!

Yours still hopefully,
Sammy Trumple

P. S. I intend to look up this guy from Fomalhaut.

Interstellar Division
Terran Insurance Company
Baltimore, Md., Earth

Dear Sammy:

Six weeks now without a sale. What's the matter with you? Getting soft? Homesick? Joanie is all right, I assure you. Hell's bells, man, IF YOU CAN PLANET-FALL, YOU CAN SELL. And by the way, you go right ahead and sell 'em. Let the boys in the actuary department worry about having to pay off immediately. We're sales, Sammy. Sales.

Why don't you go out into the grass roots somewhere, where this bird from Fomalhaut hasn't tried his hand? Maybe he's soured all the Halcyonians on life insurance with the wrong approach. Over-aggressive or something.

Buck up, Sammy. I've still got a little faith in you. Explore. Consider. Sweat. Sell.

Yours in sales,
Herman Spottsworth

Rmpldecroidesanspertzkle
Halcyon

Dear Boss:

I'm out here in Rmpldecroidesanspertzkle trying your suggestion about the grass roots. It's a small town, population under two thousand, without an important war industry. You'd think it would be safe from air-raids, but it's not. As I told you when I first reached Halcyon, they have no real reason for war. War is like a game with them. Their best bombers are sent out after hospital ships, I understand. Tennyrate, tomorrow I'm going to try my luck here in Rmpldecroidesanspertzkle.

Meanwhile, I have something of interest to report. Remember that guy I mentioned, Lar Luk, the insurance salesman from Fomalhaut? I met him in Halcyon City before I took the monorail to Rmpldecroidesanspertzkle, and we had a

long talk.

"I said, 'I hope you don't think I'm poaching on your territory Mr. Luk.' I then turned down the translator to soft obsequious. 'I assure you, that's not the way Terran Insurance operates. We didn't know you were here.'"

"That's quite all right," Lar Luk told me. "You can have the whole planet for all I care."

"Are you going back to Fomalhaut?" I asked hopefully.

"Goodness, no. I had my savings shipped here to Halcyon and started a munitions plant. I'm making a fortune."

I next asked Lar Luk (translator on shocked voice) about his Company Loyalty. He said, "That's a lot of (CENSORED BY MY TRANSLATOR)! When in Rome, heh-heh . . ." It seems every civilized planet has an author who said something like "when in Rome, etc."

"You didn't happen to try the grass roots, did you?" I asked with my translator in indifferent because I didn't want Lar Luk to get the idea I was eager and maybe try it himself.

"Friend," admitted Lar Luk, "I tried everything. Without any success. Say, why don't you come into munitions with me? There's a whole colony of extra-halcyonian insurance salesmen going into mun-

itions here. I could use a partner."

That ended our conversation. I'm going to cold-canvas Rmpled-croidesanspertxkle in the morning. I'll keep in touch.

Pessimistically.
Sammy Trumple

XXX — SUBSPACEGRAM —
XXX FROM HERMAN SPOT-
TSWORTH INTERSTELLAR
DIVISION TERRAN INSUR-
ANCE COMPANY BALTI-
MEARTH XXX TO SAMMY
TRUMPLE RMPLEDECROIDES-
ANSPERTXKLE HALCYLON
XXX DON'T GO GETTING
ANY IDEAS FROM THIS LAR
LUK FELLOW XXX REMEM-
BER YOUR COMPANY LOY-
ALTY XXX REMEMBER OUR
MOTTO XXX REMEMBER
ALL THOSE PREMIUMS YOU
HAVE TO PAY XXX THE
CHIEF OF SALES WANTS RE-
SULTS SOON XXX. I WANT
RESULTS SOON XXX OTHER-
WISE HE'LL HAVE MY HEAD
XXX I'LL HAVE YOUR HEAD
SPOTTSWORTH XXX TRANS-
MITTED VIA ALPHA CEN-
TAURI SUBSPACE STATION
XXX SEND FLOWERS BY SUB-
SPACE TO ANY PART OF
MILKYWAY GALAXY AT NO
EXTRA COST XXX QUARTER-
LY SPECIAL: ARCHENAR III
DRAGON BLOSSOMS XXX

ALPHACENT XXX

Rmpldcroidesanspertxkle
Halcyon

Dear Boss:

You don't have to worry about *my* company loyalty. But still, no sales. Unfortunately, half of Rmpldcroidesanspertxkle was wiped out yesterday in an air-raid. I'm lucky I came through it with a whole skin. I went through the hospitals and first aid stations to canvas what was left of the population. They're just not buying. They can't — or refuse to — grasp the meaning of life insurance. The following conversation is typical:

ME: But in a devastating war like this, you *need* protection. Most other insurance companies wouldn't issue policies under the circumstances. You can consider it an interstellar public service by Terran Insurance.

IT: What do I need life insurance for?

ME: Don't you have a family? Loved ones? People you'd like to see cared for after your — uh — that is, if you're suddenly not around to take care of the bills and things, if you . . .

IT: You mean if I drop dead?

ME: Yes, sir.

IT: What the hell for?

ME: One never knows when he is going to, uh, drop dead.

IT: No. I mean what the hell do I want an insurance policy for?

ME: Statistics demonstrate that everyone wants the security of a life insurance policy.

IT: I don't.

So, that's the way it goes. I've had another idea, though. How does this strike you, boss? The local Army commander has his headquarters not far from Rmpldcroidesanspertxkle. Since the whole planet is under military rule because of the constant warfare, I figure if I can sell a policy to General Multacni, I could then sell every dogfoot in his command. How does the idea strike you?

With a glimmer of hope,
Sammy Trumple

Interstellar Division
Terran Insurance Co.
Baltimore, Md., Earth

Dear Sammy:

Now you're firing away on all jets, boy! Now you're good Terran Insurance material. You're darned tooting, sell the general. We'll have it made after that.

Enthusiastically,
Hermie

P. S. I take back everything I may have said about you in haste, dear boy. You're A-1 Terran Insurance all the way. P. P. S. Joanie is languishing, she misses you so much. Make a couple of dozen sales to

cover your expense account and we'll think about getting you home on the next ship.

TICE PD END TWX

Subdivision Three Stockade
Halcyon

Dear Boss:

Lar Luk of Formalhaut is forwarding this letter for me. Help!!!
Sammy Trumble

Interstellar Division
Terran Insurance Co.
Baltimore, Md., Earth

Commanding General
Subdivision Three
Halcyon

Dear Sir:

With Terran State Department approval, I am writing you in regard to the case of our employee, Mr. S. Trumble of Earth. With full State Department backing we insist that you permit Mr. Trumble to tell us, uncensored and in his own words, what has happened, in order that we may take steps to defend him as a citizen of Earth.

Very truly yours,
Herman Spottsworth

Subdivision Three Stockade
Halcyon

Dear Boss:

Lieutenant Major Roggo Furl informs me that I'm permitted to write you an uncensored letter. Boss, I'm in the dregs of despair. Please take good care of Joanie.

MILITARY TWX FROM SUPREME COMMANDER HALCYON SUBDIVISION THREE CMM OFFICE OF MILITARY JUSTICE CMM TO CLN MR H SPOTTSWORTH CMM INTERSELLAR DIVISION CMM TERRAN INSURANCE CMM BALTIMEARTH DASH PENDING TRIAL OR APPEAL OF YOUR STATE DEPARTMENT CMM WHICHEVER COMES FIRST CMM WE ARE HOLDING TERRAN CITIZEN S TRUMPLE UNDER PROVISIONS OF ARTICLE SEVEN CMM HALCYON CODE OF MILITARY JUSTICE PD PARA ARTICLE SEVEN READS CLN QUOTE ANY INDIVIDUAL ATTEMPTING SUBVERSION OF MORAL WELFARE OF OFFICERS OR ENLISTED MEN CMM THIS COMMAND CMM IS SUBJECT TO IMPRISONMENT FOR NOT MORE THAN TWENTY FIVE HALCYONIAN YEARS PD ENDQUOTE PARA PLEASE ADVISE PD PARA FOR THE COMMANDING GENERAL CMM LIEUT DASH MAJ ROGGO FURL CMM HALCYON SUBDIVISION THREE CMM OFFICE OF MILITARY JUS-

It's cold here in the stockade. The food stinks. The other prisoners are all Halcyonian military deserters. Get me out of here!

But I better calm down and try to tell you what happened from the beginning. As I already told you, I decided to try and sell General Multacni a life insurance policy. It took me two hours working my way through the chain of command before I could even get to see the General. When I finally did, I found myself facing a huge figure in military uniform — huge even by Halcyonian standards. General Multacni is probably nine feet tall.

At first he was courteous. He listened politely, taking time out every now and then to direct a bombing raid by radio, while I explained to him exactly what life insurance was and what he could expect from the Terran policy. Like everyone else on Halcyon, he said he didn't need life insurance.

"See here, sir," I said, translator polite but not obsequious. "War is dangerous business. You never know when your number is going to be up."

The General's office rumbled with laughter as he said, "Mr. Terran—" they all call me that "—I'm indestructible." As you probably know, that's a typical military career man's attitude. They all

think they are indestructible. The other fellow will die in the trenches or the raids, not them. Even on Earth we have trouble selling our policies to the military.

I tried a different tack, the one approved for military customers on Earth. "Well, General," I said, "someday this war is going to be over. Someday you're going to retire to a farm somewhere in the good rich land around Rmpledcroide-sanspertxkle. You'll raise chickens —" which the translator translated to the Halcyonian equivalent, of course "—and bounce your little grandchildren on your knee. And then, way off in the dim future, General, years and years from now after you've lived a rich, full life, you're going to succumb to natural causes. And, if not sooner — and we certainly hope it won't be sooner — that's when your family will need this insurance policy I have for you."

"The war isn't going to end," General Multacni told me.

"But someday, when your side is victorious, and —"

"Victorious?" His translator buzzed, repeating the word syllable for syllable.

"What is that?"

"When you win the war."

"Win it? But we're not going to win it, Mr. Terran."

"Things can't be that bad." I

consoled the General giving him my best you're-down-in-the-dumps-now-but wait-till-later smile. "Maybe the enemy has you on the run just now, but you'll emerge victorious — you'll win — in the end." Of course, I would have told the same thing to General Multacni's opposite number in the opposing camp. I'm no authority on Halcyonian military matters, but under the circumstances it seemed the correct thing to say.

General Multacni stood up. "I must consider this interview at an end, Mr. Terran," he said frostily. "And I advise you to keep such subversive thoughts to yourself in the future. I'm a broad-minded Halcyonian, but —" And the General let his voice trail off ominously.

I figured he had battle fatigue, boss. Nobody could talk like that in his right mind, not even a general on a planet which is engaging in warfare almost constantly. Anyhow, I had to find out. Wandering through the military reservation on my way back to Rmpl, I chanced upon a non-commissioned officer's club. Here was the place to find out once and for all! I would speak to the NCO's who probably had families and probably were in danger of shipping out to the war-fronts at any time.

I went inside and I spoke. Maybe I made too much like a soap box

orator, I don't know. I don't know. I told them they would need insurance during the war, and after the war. I told them our policies would give them solace in these trying times, mitigating some of their worries during the necessary horrors of their struggle for existence. When finished, there wasn't a sound in the whole vast room. Boss, I thought we had them. I brought out a pad of policies and was ready to start scribbling names.

Then the military police came in and arrested me.

You know the rest. How I was taken to the subdivision stockades, given a medical exam (for some reason, a small slice of flesh was taken from my rump I won't miss it, but I couldn't sit down for two days), told that I was being held under the provisions of article seven of some kind of code of military justice. Me, subversive. When all I want to do is sell insurance policies. Boss, please get me the heck off this nutty planet.

Tragically,
Sammy Trumple

Terran Consulate
Halcyon City
Halcyon

Department of State
Halcyon Subdivision Three

Sirs:

Please explain the charges under which Terran citizen Samuel Trumble is being held in military prison.

Walter M. Foggarty
Asst. Consul

Department of State
Halcyon Subdivision Three

Mr. Walter M. Foggarty
Terran Consulate
Halcyon City

Dear Mr. Foggarty:

We hasten to respond to your note of yesterday and wish to thank you for the diplomacy, tact and patience you have displayed in this matter. We of Halcyon are firm believers in reincarnation of the individual after death, as you may know if you've read Stoy's ANTHROPOLOGICALLY SPEAKING: A Study of Sixty Seven Galactic Societies, or attended any of our religious services.

Now, since we believe in reincarnation (off the record, I'm a free-thinker, myself) and since every individual certainly can't be born with the proverbial silver feeder in his mandibles, death is an adventure eagerly anticipated by most Halcyonians, who have hopes that their station in life will be improved in their next incarnation, although they believe, of course,

that they will maintain their individuality, their *clan vital*, if you wish, in the subsequent incarnation.

Terran Citizen Trumble was guilty of the worst sort of subversion when he spoke of an end to warfare. Naturally, there are some atheistic pacifists on Halcyon who would like to see war abolished and more people live out their current incarnations, but this dangerous minority is constantly hunted down. However, we recognize extenuating circumstances in the case of Terran citizen Trumble. He is, of course, unfamiliar with our way of life. That being the case, I have recommended to the military authorities that he be pardoned without trial. I will keep you informed.

Most sincerely,
Aleg Trogonommo
Sec'y for resident extra-
Halcyonians

Terran Consulate
Halcyon City
Halcyon

Mr. Herman Spottsworth
Interstellar Division
Terran Insurance Company
Baltimore, Md., Earth

Dear Mr. Spottsworth:

The enclosed communication from Trogonommo is self-evident. Feel better?

Foggarty

Interstellar Division
Terran Insurance Co.
Baltimore, Md., Earth

SUBJECT: The Terran Sammy Trumple

Dear Sammy:

Keep your chin up, boy. It's only a matter of time now. Joanie's fine.

Hermie

MEMO:

TO: The Commanding General
FROM: Lieut-Major Roggo Furl,
Office of Military Justice
SUBJECT: The Terran Sammy Trumple

1. Trogonommo of State wants us to go easy on the prisoner, Trumple.

2. It is my feeling, though, that in the best interests of Halcyon, an example should be made of the Terran Trumple. The General realizes, I'm sure, that the colony of extra-halcyonians on Halcyon is growing. They must learn to consider Halcyonian culture as inviolate.

3. Accordingly, I recommend we go ahead with trial of Terran Trumple.

Signed
Roggo Furl
Lieut-Major

MEMO

TO: Lieut-Major Roggo Furl, Of-
fice of Military Justice
FROM: The Commanding General

1. Sorry, Furl. Torgonommo has more political friends than a Veterans' Legion Commander.

2. However, I quite agree with you. An example must be made of Trumple.

3. But not through a military court of justice. That's political dynamite.

4. I'd like to suggest that Trumple be allowed to make an attempted escape. He can be killed while fleeing. That should teach everyone a lesson, Trumple included.

5. The details of this attempted escape are in your hands. I suggest you use Lar Luk of Fomalhaut as a go-between, however. And make sure Trumple is killed!

6. After you read it, burn this letter.

Unsigned

143¼ East Scjuluk Street
Halcyon City
Halcyon

Dear Boss:

Have I got news for you!

A few days ago, Lar Luk—the ex-insurance salesman from Fomalhaut—visited me at the stockade. You could tell something was going on because Luk, usually a loud extrovert, spoke in conspiratorial whispers.

"They are going ahead with your trial," he said.

"How do you know?"

"I am in a position to know. I think you're being treated unjustly, Sammy. I came here to do something about it."

Boss, I was desperate. Despite your encouraging note, I didn't know which way to turn. I said, "Like what?"

And Luk leaned forward to whisper: "Like helping you escape."

He clamped a flipper over my mouth before I could blurt out something which would give us away. I calmed down and said: "Can we do it?"

"We can try. We have to try."

"When?" I asked.

"Tonight, after I leave, after it's dark. I had to get special dispensation to visit you. They won't let me visit you again."

"But what . . . how . . ." I'm no intriguer, boss. I felt like a pawn in this game—but a pawn who was about to be checkmated unless he did something about it.

"Here," said Lar Luk, thrusting something into my hand. "This is a Fomalhautian freezer, Sammy. You'll stop anybody dead in his tracks with it. When they come to your cell tonight and bring your meal . . ." Lar Luk didn't finish the sentence.

"You'll be waiting for me out-

side?"

"Yes. With a jetcopter, my friend. It won't be long now."

And Lar Luk was gone. I examined the weapon he had given me. It looked deadly, all right, with a dull metal finish and a wicked, funnel-like snout. I was ready, but I didn't see how I would get through the afternoon.

I tried to sleep. I couldn't. I tried to think of you and Joanie and what it would be like back on Earth. I couldn't concentrate. It grew dark slowly, the way it does on Halcyon. I thought they never would come with my supper. I thought they were starving me before the trial so I would confess readily. Then I began to think that maybe someone had seen Lar Luk give me the weapon. Perhaps the cell was wired and every word we said was heard in the stockade commander's office.

Then I heard footsteps in the corridor. It always sounds like more than one person, the Halcyonians having more legs than we do. I stood there at the door of my cell, waiting. I could feel my heart fluttering around inside me, like a bird.

The cell door opened.

At first I was going to use Lar Luk's weapon, but I didn't know what kind of noise it would make. He hadn't told me. Instead, I used

the butt of the gun, banging it down across the guard's head. He slumped at my feet. I hoped I hadn't hurt him too badly. I even hoped Lar Luk's weapon was effective but not lethal. I had nothing against the Halcyonians. I just wanted to escape.

Out into the corridor I ran, passing three cross-corridors before I reached the stockade quadrangle. In the halls, I met no one. So far, I was lucky. But then. . .

"Halt! Who goes there?"

A guard in the quadrangle challenging me!

I was trembling so much I had to hold Lar Luk's weapon in both hands to fire it. It made a noise like a siren.

The guard didn't fall. He kept coming.

I fired again.

It was a siren.

Lar Luk had tricked me.

You can imagine the pickle I was in, boss. The siren summoned more guards, who came at me from all directions. I tried to get away, pounding across the pavement of the quadrangle. From somewhere, a searchlight cut a bright yellow swath across the quadrangle. It found me and held me.

One of the guards fired a blaster, hitting me in the base of the skull and killing me instantly.

Cordially,

Sammy Trumple

Interstellar Division
Terran Insurance Co.
Baltimore, Md., Earth

Dear Sammy:

I'm glad you managed to get away, but quit pulling my leg, will you? So the guard killed you—and then you sat down and wrote me a letter. Please tell me what really happened.

By the way, I have great news for you. Joanie had a litter of four pups, all spotted brown and white and cute as the dickens. I'm sending two of them to you by Sub-space Express.

And let me know what happened, will you?

Yours in sales,
Hermie

Rmpldecroidesanspertsxkle
Halcyon

Dear Hermie:

This letter is being smuggled out to you by a friend because it never would pass the Halcyonian censor. They have a good thing and they want to keep it to themselves as much as possible and I can't blame them.

Thanks for sending along the pups. I'll be waiting for them. Give Joanie a pat on the head for me.

Incidentally, cancel all my in-

surance policies. And I quit the company, effective immediately. I'm staying here on Halcyon.

I wasn't pulling your leg, Hermie. You remember I told you a slice of flesh was taken from my rump at the stockade. That's how the Halcyonians have developed their reincarnation process. They've learned a way to duplicate an individual artificially using a sample of his hereditary genes from the slice of flesh. Every Halcyonian has his slice on file of course. The new embryo is then grown rapidly, in a

matter of a few days.

Lar Luk and I figured it's about time heavy industry came to Rmpledroidesanspertsxkle. We're opening a new munitions factory here, which suits the Halcyonians fine. Most of them are in favor of war because they'd like to better their position in life and might do it next time around on the new incarnation.

This reincarnation sure as hell beats life insurance, doesn't it?

With fond regards,
Sammy

INTRODUCING the AUTHOR



George O. Smith



(Continued From Page 2)

on Mount Wilson had just provided some evidence that certain spiral, misty clouds were actually distant galaxies made up of billions of stars collected into "Island Universes" similar in size and shape to our own galaxy. Early hints were coming in that a new outermost planet had been discovered; Pluto was confirmed and named just in time to cinch my interest in science. I majored in physics and mathematics, and took some minor courses in astronomy and celestial mechanics.

This background puts me in an exclusive but diminishing club of

science fiction writers who can fall back upon their training for their science. Of course, the day when science fiction had to be liberally peppered with snibbets and bits of science—both honest fact and bafflegab—is diminishing too. And while this makes for a more interesting story line, let's face one fact: You can't eliminate science from science fiction and still have science fiction. And so the possession of a technical background helps any writer stay away from gross errors, as well as provide an air of verisimilitude even to those spots still remaining where fact must give

way to their imagination.

As an author, however, I lack the standard colorful background. I've never hunted walrus, slung hash in the Andes, mined gold (or uranium), nor piloted a bulldozer. I don't wear a beard and I don't fancy red checkered shirts. I have yet to spend a night in jail, although I did once collect a traffic ticket for jaywalking in Cincinnati, where crossing the street is apparently illegal.

This mundane and conventional life of mine may be the cause of my only turning out about a hundred thousand words per year. I'm sure I could do better if my life were more complicated. So now with this explained, we'll get back to the original question:

I Write Science Fiction Be-

cause—

1. I fell heir to a typewriter in 1942 and I'm the kind of guy who can't stand to see machinery grow rusty from disuse.

2. Rumor holds that magazines pay money for printable material. This rumor is true, although it is also true that some rumors are louder than others.

3. There aren't enough of the kind of story I prefer; I have helped to fill this crying need by writing yarns that I like to read.

And so a review of the past twelve years indicates that there are just enough people who agree with Item 3 to make Item 2 provide me with three subsequent replacements to Item 1.

Hoping you are the same—

—George O. Smith



"Now let me tell you about the auxilliary engine in case something happens to the Atomic jets . . ."

**You've heard reports about strange lights
in the sky — flying saucers and all that rubbish!
A Joke? Illusion? Possibly, unless, of course—**

You Don't Walk Alone

by

Frank M. Robinson

IT wasn't my idea — I wasn't the first one to think of it. It started with John Kelley, who passed the idea on to me. And I'm going to do something about it. I thing John wanted to but he never got the chance.

It began about two months ago when I was sitting at the lunch counter in Chicago's LaSalle Street station, drinking coffee. I was on my second cup when John walked in. He saw me about the same time I saw him and came over to the counter and we gave each other the I-haven't- seen-you-for-years-what-are-you-doing-now routine.

Which was a laugh, in a way, because while he wouldn't know what I had been doing, I couldn't help but know what he had been doing. And so would you if I told you his right name. You wouldn't have recognized him, of course. He was the inconspicuous type, the sort of man who blended in so well

with his background you would have had to hunt to find him, even if he was standing right in front of you. He was thin, not particularly tall, with limp, straw colored hair that clung close to his scalp and a complexion that had never been exposed to the sun. He was dressed in an old blue suit, a shapeless hat that might have been new five years ago, and a lightweight gray topcoat that hadn't been cleaned and pressed since he had bought it.

See? You wouldn't have noticed him at all.

It's a somewhat deceptive description, of course. John could have afforded a Brooks Brothers suit and at least one Cadillac but the fact was that he preferred being inconspicuous and in his job it was a definite advantage. Both John and I were reporters but the difference was—as Oscar Levant would say—the difference between talent and



genius.

He ordered coffee then gave me a once-over with a pair of tired blue eyes that took in everything from my brown shoes that needed a shine to the newest thing in string bow-ties.

"How's it going, Charley?"

I blew the loose sugar off a doughnut and dangled it just over the edge of the cup. "It goes all right. It could be better but I suppose it could be worse, too. What brings you to Chicago?"

"I'm on a story."

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to pry."

He got a refill on his coffee and stirred in half a pound of sugar. "You're not prying. As a matter of fact, maybe you can help me."

"What's up?"

"I'm doing a story about an invasion. It's one that started just a few years ago, one that I'm afraid was highly successful, and one that I think is still going on."

I looked at him blankly. "Invasion? What invasion?"

"One from out in space," he said casually. "You know, one from another planet or another star. That type of invasion."

I sat there letting my coffee grow

cold because all the time I was thinking that the one thing in the world John Kelley didn't possess was a sense of humor. As long as I had known him he had never told a joke and came damn close to never laughing at any.

"I don't recall any reports of anybody running around with six arms or green skin or tentacles instead of limbs," I protested mildly.

HE shook his head, deadly serious. "You're not looking at it logically, Charley. The only beings who would be interested in the planet in the first place are beings who could live here. And if they could live here, then it's possible they could have the same sort of physical make-up." He paused. "Maybe the exact same sort of physical make-up. Even to the extent of the average man's desire to avoid trouble."

Kelley had something there. Every time you think of an invasion from outer space, you think of a hundred huge rocket ships settling down with ray guns going full blast and king-sized atomic bombs breaking up the landscape. Actually, of course, it doesn't have to be like that at all. Granted a physical resemblance in the first place, then maybe it wouldn't be an invasion. It might be more of an . . . infiltration.

I jerked my thumb towards the

people who crowded around the train gates and sprawled out on the benches. "You mean that some of those people aren't . . . genuine?"

"That's right," John said slowly. "Some of them aren't the real McCoy."

I watched the people for a moment more, staring hard at the old man buying a paper at the newsstand and the old woman who was selling it to him.

"How can you tell which are which?"

"I can't. So far as I know, there isn't any way."

He had forgotten his coffee now. It sat at his elbow, an unappetizing mixture of lukewarm grounds, cigarette ash, and disintegrated doughnut.

"Any leads?"

"You've been reading them every day. Charley. A dozen times a year somebody sees flashes in the sky, a dozen times lights settle down in relatively uninhabited sections of the country. Sure, people see them and report them. And what happens?" He shrugged. "The papers treat them as part of the silly season, readers only glance at the reports. You know as well as I that nobody packs up a camera to go out and investigate."

I took another look around the station. The bored people, sitting on benches and reading their papers. The mother with her baby,

sleeping now but one you knew would be squalling in a few minutes. The porter sweeping up just in front of the wash-room. The man in the information booth rifling through a stack of time-tables.

All very prosaic all very every dayish. I turned back to Kelley, my face showing disbelief.

"You don't believe me, do you?"

I turned up my hands. "It's a pretty big order, John."

"That's the one big drawback—convincing people." He sat there for a moment, fingering the check the waitress had given him, then made up his mind. "Meet me tonight by the library, Randolph street side. Nine o'clock. I'll have some photographs along."

I reached for my hat. "Exhibit A better be pretty convincing John." And oddly enough, I didn't have any doubts but what they would be. His reputation was that good.

It was a nice, warm summer night when I got to the library a couple of minutes after nine. Downtown was already filling up with teenagers and pick-ups who flutter around the bright-lights like moths around a candle. I stood on the library steps and waited watching people crowd out of the IC entrance.

I had smoked my way through half a pack of cigarettes before it occurred to me that maybe John

wasn't going to show. My first thought was that he had pulled a gag on me. My next was that something had delayed him. I started to walk over to his hotel.

Between Michigan and Wabash, right next door to the library, there's a small street that's more of an alley than a street. Street cars used to turn down it before the Chicago Transit Authority got into office and a lot of trucks use it to make deliveries. It's not too well lighted and the only people who use it at night to cut through from Washington to Randolph are people in a hurry.

You're way ahead of me, I know. And you're right. But you're wrong if you think I found him after five minutes of playing Sherlock. The police found him at three in the morning after they had combed the loop half the night.

John Kelley was in one of the store fronts, his head bashed in.

JOHAN Kelley was the first martyr to the cause. In a lot of ways, he didn't make a very good one. The papers put it down to gangland enemies—the usual explanation for murders in Chicago—and for a while I thought I had convinced myself that they were right.

Then I caught myself glancing behind me when I walked up dark streets at night and staring hard at

the mirror in the local bar, watching the people on the stools and wondering which were real and which were fake. Kelley's story had started to haunt me and I couldn't shake it.

I thought maybe a vacation would help so I pulled strings at the office and got the last two weeks in July. I usually take my two weeks up in northern Wisconsin, around Hayward and Spooner and the Chippewa Flowage. It's one of the best fishing spots in the nation—everything from muskies to bullheads, bass to trout. You can take along a small fortune in fly-rod for game fish, or you can have a lot of fun with a plain bamboo pole and bobber for pan fish.

Fred Gray—he was in the advertising department—went along with me. After all, fishing is a gregarious sport and besides, whoever heard of going alone? And Fred was the kind of man who was going company. The big, bluff variety with a string of stories as long as your arm.

We packed up Friday night and left early Saturday. With both of us trading off on the driving, it was still a fourteen hour trip. If we pushed it we could get to the Flowage early Saturday evening.

Fred took his turn at the wheel first and I sat in the back seat and snoozed. When I woke up it was early afternoon and the towns and

the farmlands had started to fall away and there were longer and longer stretches of second growth timber and wild looking country that was largely devoted to Indian reservations. And even then, the shacks were getting fewer and fewer — an occasional wisp of smoke every few miles marking a cabin back in the brush.

I took the wheel and when we had about two hours to go, I stopped at a cross-roads store to pick up some groceries. While I was picking over the bacon and the pancake flour and the cornmeal, Fred was glancing through the assortment of plugs in the beat-up showcase near the door.

I took what we needed up to the counter and slid them across to the character who ran the place. He was an old man, the veins standing out big and blue on his arms and his face showing the effects of a lot more than just age.

"Henney's pancake flour is real good flour," he said, glancing at the box I had picked out.

"What's wrong with this?"

"Nothing—just make a couple more cents on Henney's."

I started for a moment, then decided to be obliging and went back and got a package of Henney's. "Do you have any white flour?"

"Yep, we got flour. Comes in bulk—gotta ask for it."

He fixed me up with a paper bag

containing a couple of pounds, then started to figure how much I owed him, using a pencil and a hunk of wrapping paper.

"Pretty dead around here, isn't it?"

"Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't."

Fred came over with a brilliant red and blue striped plug. "How much?"

The old man glanced at the plug and then at Fred. "Two fifty, maybe."

Fred dug for the money and I said, "When isn't it dead around here?"

"Last night, for one." He pocketed the two fifty. "Lots of lights off in the woods a spell. Figured it was some city people. Local folks go to bed at a decent time of night."

I stood there looking at him and John Kelley's nightmare crawled out of the dim recesses of my mind where I thought I had buried it, and squatted right between my eyes, like a big, friendly collie dog making itself at home. Lights. Late at night lights. Lights like in a hundred news reports I had filed and forgotten.

I opened my mouth to say something and then let it go. An old school bus had ground to a stop out in front. The driver came in and I didn't more than glance at him. Young fellow, tanned, wearing

marine fatigue pants and a white tee shirt. A vet, I thought. You see a hundred like him every day.

He jerked a thumb towards the gas pump in front. "Need some gas, Pop. About ten should do it."

The old man gave up figuring what I owed him and went out to fill the tank. I tried to strike up a conversation.

"Beautiful country around here."

"Sure is. I like it best in the summertime."

"Do much fishing?"

He shrugged. "Some. I'm generally pretty busy."

I looked out through the window at the bus where the old man was cranking the gas pump counting the profits on ten gallons of gas. The bus itself was battered and scarred, the red and yellow paint flaking off the sides. It was filled with adults—most of them young—and a sprinkling of kids.

"Some kind of outing?"

He laughed. "That's right. The Young People's League from the Methodist Church in Winook."

"Hard group to keep entertained, huh?"

He made a face and said, "You know how it goes."

The old man came back from the pump. "That's two seventy-six, son. Took a little over ten."

The driver paid and started for the door.

"See you around," I said.

"Yeah, sure thing."

I turned back to the old man and asked, "What do I owe you for the groceries?"

"Call it three and a quarter," he said slowly, not taking his eyes off the window where the bus still sat while the driver worked the gas pedal. The aimless whirring finally caught and the bus lumbered off. "Something funny there. Real funny."

"What do you mean?"

He came out of it, took my money, and leaned closer so even Fred, who was still fingering plugs at the far counter, couldn't hear. "You know, that young feller came by last night and that bus of his was empty. There's a fork in the road up ahead and he went to the right. Nothing up that away at all. The road just deadheads into the brush for about three miles and that's it. And I would've sworn that's where he came from just now. Didn't hear him go back last night and ain't seen him all morning. Don't know where all those people come from."

"He said they were from some young people's group in Winook."

The old man looked surprised. "Winook? No town around here by that name that I heard of—and I been here a mighty long time."

I picked up my load of groceries and started for the door. "Maybe I misunderstood him," I mumbled.

"He must've meant some other town."

Out in the car, I let the motor idle for a minue. Up the road for about three miles, the old man had said. My stomach felt funny and the palms of my hands were oozing dampness. But I had to take a look, I had to go.

"What's the matter?" Fred asked.

"Nothing," I said. I put the car in gear and went straight ahead. I took the right fork.

"Where you going?"

"Just up the road a bit. I want to check on something."

He looked sour. "It's after six now. We don't have much time."

"It'll only take a couple of minutes."

He turned indifferent. "Suit yourself. I was thinking we might get some fishing in." He let it hang there and I almost changed my mind. You know how it is with fishing. If there's any daylight at all, you want to at least trail a hook in the water before hitting the sack.

THE asphalt changed to loose gravel and I ground my teeth every time I thought of what the gravel and the dust were doing to the finish of the car. It took ten minutes to make those three miles. Then the gravel thinned out and we came to the end of the road in a small clearing rimmed with pine

trees and other scrub timber.

Fred was surly. "Here we are—now what the hell was it that you wanted to see?"

I got out and stretched, then put my hands on my hips and looked around the clearing. It almost looked like Fred was right. There wasn't a damn thing to be seen. Brush and trees and knee-high grass and the two inch mosquitoes that only seem to come out at dusk. Then I saw what looked like a piece of paper by one of the trees. I ran over and picked it up. It was paper and yet not paper—it looked more like a fusion of paper and plastic with an odd kind of printing on it. I couldn't shake the idea that it was a scrap of some foreign paper. Then I looked around and saw where the grass was trampled and where a rough path led back through the woods.

I yelled, "I'll only be gone a minute!" and started out.

It was longer than a minute. It was the longest half hour in my life. The path wound between trees and through little gulleys and I had trouble following it because the sun was going down and shadows half hid the path. And then I came out in another clearing—a big clearing. It took me a minute to appreciate the fact that the center of the clearing wasn't a clearing so much as a depression. A large, neat, circular depression where small

trees, bushes, and grass had been mashed flat to a pasty smear of green.

And then I saw other things. Bits of clothing—clothing made of cloth that I didn't recognize. More of the plastic-paper, some wrapped around lumps of what I imagined was food. I circled the clearing. The path I had taken was the only exit—or entrance.

And you're way ahead of me again, aren't you? Kelley had been right all along. The lights the old man had seen the night before were those of a ship from God only knew where. The young man with the bus had gone there earlier that evening to pick up his passengers.

The bus driver. The bus-driver who had reminded me of a hundred other people I had known. Or two hundred. Or a thousand. And his curious-faced passengers, none of whom had gotten out to stretch their legs or buy a candy bar or chance a nickle in the coke machine or take advantage of the pause that refreshes.

I looked round the clearing again. Before they had gotten on the bus, they had changed clothes and then . . . they had had a picnic.

Which I suppose was as good a way as any to start their first day on Earth.

THE cabin was small and cozy and smelled of pine and cedar

and fish. I sat on one of the bunks and pawed through a suit-case while Fred moved around and lighted kerosene lamps and played boy scout with the fire place. I found what I was looking for and then discovered a glass on the window sill. I wiped it out, thinking all the time about detective stories where the private eye took his straight—in a dirty glass.

Fred didn't approve of drinking on fishing trips and his plump face showed it.

"You look scared, Charley."

"I am."

"Something to do with going into the woods back there?"

"That's right. A lot to do with it."

He sat on the bunk opposite me and concentrated on tamping tobacco into his pipe. "You wouldn't care to tell me about it, would you?"

"Sure, I'll tell you," I said. "I'll tell anybody. I'll tell the whole world." I tilted the glass to my lips and let the liquid burn its way down. "It started with a damned good friend of mine named Kelley." And I told Fred the same story that Kelley had told me. And I told him what I had discovered back in the woods.

Fred laughed. "You're taking it too seriously, Charley. If you did some research on it, I'd bet you ten to one that you'd find a natural cause for everything."

"I've done some research," I said tightly. "Only I didn't know that I was doing it at the time."

I felt a little reluctant to talk. This wasn't the sort of setting where you talked about an invasion from another world. The door of the cabin was open and I could smell the lake and the night air and the nearby pines. It made it seem so damned unreal.

"What kind of research?"

"Nothing intentional—just stuff I picked up every day." The level in the bottle went down another half an inch. "They're running a regular commuter service, Fred. They're bringing them in by the thousands. By the hundreds of thousands. And all within the last few years."

He seemed interested. "Why do you say the last few years?"

I shivered. "The number of sightings of strange lights in the sky that have been made, for one thing. And population statistics for another. Our birthrate has been declining for some time. But in recent years the population has shot way up. More than it should."

"It's the veterans. Starting new families."

"Yeah? How many vets do you know with a lot of kids?"

"Anything else?" Fred asked softly.

"It's the perfect time for it," I mumbled. "World's all mixed up,

everything is in a state of flux. They could land and how could you tell? DP's come into the country every day. That's one reason why we never notice."

"And you can't tell the aliens from human beings, can you?"

"No, you can't." I paused and wiped away the sweat from my forehead. "They're perfect copies. There's no way of finding them out. The man in the store couldn't have been one. The driver was—and I couldn't have guessed." I laughed. "You could be one, too, for that matter."

He was up at the fireplace, stirring the embers again. When I finished talking he turned around, the poker clutched in his hand. His face was impassive.

"Not only could be, Charley. I am."

I suppose there's a time in everybody's life when the chips are down and you have to react automatically, you have no room for thought. I let him have the bottle square in the face and then the poker glanced off my shoulder and he was on me.

He gripped me by the throat and forced me back against the wall. "You'll never leave alive," he said and it was like ice-water down my neck because he said it in a monotone, with no emotion at all. I tried to break his grip and couldn't and then the world turned a spotty black and I could feel my life start

to slip away like a bar of wet soap.

I fell to the floor and doubled my knees and drove my heavy boots into his stomach. He had to loosen his hold then and for a moment I was free. I didn't waste time and I didn't bother about fighting fair.

We both went for the poker but I got there first.

I killed a man that night. Without compunction, without regrets, without any hesitation. I killed Fred and buried him in the woods and loaded the car that same night.

When I started the car it kicked right over and I spun out of there, gravel spraying from beneath the wheels. I didn't breathe any easier until I was a hundred miles away.

I thought a lot about what I was going to do on the way back. I'm not the hero type but I just can't see them move in on Earth without fighting back. And I consider Fred only the downpayment on John Kelley's murder.

One important thing. I've found a flaw, a weak spot.

The invaders are imitators. The perfect imitators. They're a lot like Fred was. They never have original ideas of their own, they parrot the editorial pages and even the stock of jokes they save for stag parties aren't funny because you've heard them all before.

You can see them on the street-car on their way to work. Half will

sit with blank stares on their faces. reading the transitads, while the other half will sit with their noses buried in their papers. Watch them. If they looked alike you'd be reminded of the rockettes on the stage of the RCA Music Hall. Or walk into a bar when the fights are on and watch the customers with their faces glued to the TV sets. All with their glasses of beer in the right hand, all with the same rapt expressions on their faces.

You see, they're imitating human beings. And they've got an organization. They've infiltrated the government bureaucracy. How do I know? Read some of the pamphlets the government puts out. There's one on washing dishes that starts out with the proper size pan. Silly. But not for somebody for whom washing dishes is a brand new experience. And there's another pamphlet that says younger married men and women own more sports clothes, older men wear hats, and older women have more fur coats. Very interesting data. Like when I was in the army and they briefed us on foreign customs before going out on a pass.

There's probably thousands of Imitators in the government itself, weighing, analyzing, and surveying humanity so they can issue reports

on how to act . . . like a human being. Reports and pamphlets that are point for point instruction books for the new arrivals.

There's an organization. And there has to be somebody at the top of that organization. That's the man I want to get.

Fred knew a lot of people he had a lot of contacts, and I'm investigating them one by one. It isn't going to be too long before I meet somebody that Fred knew back . . . home. And then I'll find out about the organization and I'll be on my way.

I already have a good idea whom I'm looking for. He's an average man with maybe a wife and a couple of kids, driving last year's car and living in a house that isn't all paid for. He likes TV and he drinks beer and he's drummed up a hell of a lot of interest in baseball games. He probably wears blue serge and white shirts and small figured ties and silk socks and black shoes. Maybe he even wears a hat, he's probably that age.

And I think there's even a good chance he's reading this magazine. It's become pretty popular, it's the thing to do.

But it isn't going to do any good to run or hide or doubt your friends. Someday I'm going to find you.

DO YOURSELF A FAVOR — SUBSCRIBE TO MADGE
— SEE PAGE 130 FOR BONUS OFFER —

★ *Synco-Cyclotron* ★

ASIDE from the research in physics for which the billion volt synco-cyclotron is designed, there is another and equally important use for which it is intended. This is biological research. A gigantic instrument such as this is capable of generating cosmic rays of the same power as would be found in space—and that is one of the great un-

knowns of space travel.

Scientists know that men who go above the stratosphere will be bombarded through and through by blasts of cosmic rays. Their lethality is questionable. Some think they will fry human tissue to a crisp. Others think they pass harmlessly through flesh. The answer will be partially found by the "Ess-Cee."



"We're rich — we're rich! Four million crooxtos!"

Training Device

by

Theodore R. Cogswell

Hatch was facing his first day of combat and he was scared. But then, Larn was in much the same boat — or more specifically, body! . . .

THE unshaven sergeant slowly surveyed the handful of new replacements and then let loose a stream of tobacco juice that just missed the feet of the blonde boy who stood at the end of the irregular line.

"Well?" he said finally.

Private Hatch stepped hesitantly forward, saluted awkwardly, and held out a manila envelope.

"We were told to report to Lieutenant Cutler, sir."

The sergeant spat again. "My name's Black," he growled. "Sergeant Black. The only one that gets sirred around here is the lieutenant and he ain't in no position to take any pleasure in it." He pointed to a bloodstained shelter-half covered with a swarm of buzzing green flies that had some-

thing under it. "He got his last night, so I'm running things until headquarters digs up a stray louie somewheres. Four of you go and dig a hole over there and get him underground. He's getting ripe already."

The replacements shuffled their feet and looked at each other, but nobody made a move toward the bloody bundle that once had been a man.

Black's voice cracked like a whip. "When I say do something, I want it done now, not tomorrow. 'You!'"—he stabbed a finger at the blond boy — "What's your name?"

"Hatch, sir . . . I mean, sergeant."

"You're in charge of the burial detail. Take the three men next



to you and get that grave dug. And make it deep enough. God knows when we'll be getting out of this hole, and unless you get him a good three feet under he's going to stink up the place. The rest of you come with me."

The four men watched as the

sergeant led the rest into a dugout that cut into the side of the steep hill that stood between them and the enemy, and then reluctantly turned to the business at hand. Private Hatch went off by himself and got sick afterwards.

* * *

"I'd like to resign, sir. I didn't know it was going to be like this."

"Nonsense, son. After you have a couple of actions under your belt, you won't mind a bit."

There was a momentary blaze of light through the side vision port as the great training ship's orbit took it out of the third planet's shadow into the incandescent glare of the sun, and then it dimmed as a damping shield slid automatically into place.

"But, sir, he'd be alive now if I hadn't got scared and made him run."

The officer shrugged impatiently. "Another week, another month, what difference does it make? After all, we don't start these wars. As for your losing your head—you obviously have to be censored for it, but I wouldn't worry about it too much. During your first action anything can happen. It's how you hold up during your second and third and fourth that's important."

"But for those few minutes I was him. I felt what he felt when I made him run away. When the bullet hit, it hit me!"

"So now you know what it feels like. Next time you'll be more careful. Request for permission to resign denied."

A soft chime sounded from the wall speaker and then a crisp voice said, "Now hear this. Now hear

this. All cadets will report to training stations at 36:82. All cadets will report to training stations at 36:82. That is all."

As the voice from the speaker died, the officer behind the desk gave a gesture of dismissal.

"All right, Larn, you've had your say. Now report to your station and draw yourself a new body. And remember that someday before too long you may be in a spot where you'll have to use your own. The sooner you learn how to take care of it, the better."

"REPLACEMENTS," announced Sergeant Black pontifically, "aint worth the powder it takes to blow them to hell. And when they finally learn enough the hard way to be of some use around here, it usually ain't soon enough.

"Now listen, and listen good. We got that whole damn ridge to hold, and only half enough men to hold it with. Eighteen men got it during the last attack — for replacements for which I get you characters. I got just one word for you and I want you to remember it anytime you get a sudden impulse to make like a hero. You only got one body. When that's gone, the QM ain't going to issue you another one. So take care of it and don't get it full of holes.

You ain't much, but you're all I got—and God knows when I'll get any more once you're gone!"

* * *

Private Hatch wiggled slowly along the shallow furrow in the hard ground that passed as a communication trench until he reached an emplacement on the crest of the ridge, a natural cleft in the rock that had been banked with sandbags.

"Sergeant Black said I was supposed to relieve you," he said to a hollow-eyed pfc who squatted listlessly beside the machine gun that poked out through a narrow slit to cover the forward slope. The other gave a tired nod and moved over to give him room.

"Got a cigarette?"

Hatch slid down beside him and handed over a crumpled pack.

"How many did they send up this time?"

"Eleven."

The pfc let out a low groan. "That means I don't get out of here for another two weeks anyway. Your first time up?" It was a statement rather than a question but Hatch nodded anyway.

"Fine experience for a young man," said the pfc with a sour grin. "Builds character." He took a last drag on the cigarette aimed carefully, and with a quick flip of his index finger sent it arcing to-

ward the machinegun slot in the sandbags in front of them. When it went through without touching either side he gave a little grunt of satisfaction, and picking up a small sharp rock, made a scratch on the boulder beside him.

"I'm getting better," he said. "That's thirty-six straight without a miss. Six more and I'll have the company record. There's no real competition left, though, with the lieutenant gone. That boy really had a good eye."

Hatch thought of the thing under the canvas and swallowed with difficulty.

"What happened?"

"Damn if I know," said the pfc. "Patrol came over last night—nothing special, they were just feeling around—and suddenly for no good reason at all the lieutenant starts to blubber like a baby and takes off over the skyline. They got him before he got twenty yards."

"I had to help bury him," said the blond boy. "I got sick."

"You'll get used to it," said the pfc. "Guess I'd better get down and get some chow and a little shut-eye. I've got a hunch it may be rough out tonight. You hold the fort. I'll be back to relieve you about sundown."

Private Hatch peeped cautiously out through the firing slit at the

arid expanse of rocky ground that stretched down in front of him, and then back at the pfc.

"Anything special I should watch for?" he asked uncertainly.

The pfc showed yellowed teeth as he gave a short bark of a laugh. "Yeah, our friends across the way. They start coming, you stop 'em. The machinegun jams, you use your carbine. Your carbine jams, you use your teeth. Your teeth jam, you send a letter through channels and requisition a new set." He laughed again and then slapped the blond boy on the shoulder. "Relax, kid. Nothing ever happens around here until after sundown, and I'll be back to show you the ropes before then." With an expert wiggle he slipped into the shallow communication trench, and in a moment was gone.

Hatch found his fingers shaking a bit when he tried to light a cigarette. It didn't taste right and without thinking he flipped it toward the machinegun slot. It hit six inches to one side and rolled back to his feet. He sat staring at it for a moment and then picked it up and stuck it back in his mouth.

It was a good quarter of a mile back to the training stations and Larn had to run to make it on time. Cadets weren't allowed to use the

gray tubes except during emergencies and this wasn't an emergency—it was just the second day of advanced training. The other cadets in his section were already strapped into their transpsych trainers when he got there. Nobody said anything but he could tell from the way they were damping their thoughts that they hadn't forgotten his fiasco with the Blue lieutenant the day before. His fingers felt thick and clumsy as he slid the shining helmet over his head and adjusted the webbing that held him inert in his elongated cradle.

"Ready?"

He wanted to strip off his harness and run back to the cramped security of his quarters, but he didn't. Instead he reached out his foot and kicked over the switch that connected the helmet on his head with the disassociaters.

THE pfc had guessed wrong. For once the enemy didn't wait for darkness. One minute there was only sun and dust and the shrill chirp of a small bird hidden in a little pile of brush to the left, and the next a shrieking human wall structured itself out of nowhere and came howling up the arid slopes toward the forward positions. If anybody thought of the green kid sitting alone in the ob-

servation post, they didn't have time to do anything about it. The enemy was almost through the left flank and were still coming.

The blond boy did the best he could. Two dozen figures were working their way up the slope toward him. Once his position was taken, heavy machine guns would be mounted in it to sweep the exposed flanks below.

Just a second before the yells had sent him diving to his gun, he had smiled for the first time that day and scratched his name and a single line on a clear spot on the boulder. After three hours of trying he had finally managed to flip a cigarette end through the firing slot. And then, glad in a way that nobody was there to see how scared he was, but wishing at the same time that there was somebody around to tell him what to do, he found himself at the gun, firing quick bursts at the sweaty faced men who were running up the slope toward him.

He broke the first wave, and then the second, and then, when they started up again, the gun jammed. Closer they came, and closer, until he could almost make out individual faces. They were more cautious now. They came in quick rushes, darting forward and hitting the ground to take advantage of every broken bit of shel-

ter. He stood frozen, watching them as they worked their way closer, and then suddenly, without warning, he felt his nerve break and his legs bunch under him for the leap that would take him out of the foxhole and down the back slope to safety.

And then, before his brain could release the signal that would send him running like a rabbit, something happened. He fell back against the parapet as he felt an indescribable twisting inside his head, a wrenching feeling as if blunt probes were being punched through his brain pan into the quivering grey matter cupped within—and then he was rammed back into the tiny corner of darkness and left impotent as some strange other took over the neural controls that operated his strong young body.

Cadet Larn couldn't control the shudder of revulsion that swept through him as he took control of the strange new body. But, physically loathsome as it was with its pulp covered bone and light and almost hairless outer surface, he knew he had to control his disgust and use it as efficiently as he could in the short time that was allotted to him.

He knew what he was supposed to do, but when he managed to focus the oddly placed pair of eyes

and saw what was coming toward him, the same feeling he had known the night before flooded into him. He wanted to get away, as far away from the snarling men below as he could force his new legs to carry him. He'd be sent back in disgrace, but even garrison duty on Deneb, dull as it was, was better than this. He poised to run, but then something—perhaps the dreams he'd had before he knew the reality—stopped him. Maybe he could hang on just a little while. Maybe he could get used to it. Maybe it wouldn't be as bad as it was yesterday. Slowly, holding the body in the emplacement by sheer force of will, he began a check of the weapon that rested on its tripod in front of him.

This they called a heavy machinegun.

He tried to remember the diagram he had been shown during briefing. The force of expanding gases pushed this back this way and in turn activated that. It was crude, but it was deadly to soft bodies such as the one he controlled. Experimentally he peeped down over the sights and swung the weapon back and forth on its tripod. This was better than the clumsy hand weapon he had been equipped with the night before. Now the firing lever. He had dozed

a bit during the lecture but this must be it. He pressed it. Nothing happened. If he retreated now, he was justified—but after last night the umpires might misunderstand his motives.

It took him another precious second before he could figure out what was wrong. When he did, he grabbed a heavy rock from the bottom of the trench and smashed at the clearing lever again and again until with a sudden snap the off-size cartridge that had been jamming the mechanism came flying out.

During the briefing lecture he had been instructed to fire in short, careful bursts, but the ones in the differently colored uniforms were so close, and there were so many of them, that he just held the trigger down and swung the muzzle back and forth like a deadly hose.

Twice men reached him. The first put a bullet in his right shoulder, the second jabbed him in the stomach with a long knife that was fastened to the end of his weapon before he could be disposed of. After that he found it increasingly difficult to make the body follow his commands. When a fragment of the grenade that smashed the breech mechanism of his machinegun ripped open his forehead so that he was blinded by

his own blood, it was even worse. All that he could do was to fumble down into the red darkness for the grenades piled by his feet and hurl them as fast and as far in the direction of the firing as the weakening organic machine he was in command of would permit. The last thing he heard was a shout from behind him, "Hold on, we're coming!" and then he slumped down into blackness.

Cadet Larn sat on the edge of his trainer with his helmet in his lap, unable for a moment to disassociate himself from the savage action that was still going on ten thousand miles below. It wasn't until the speaker set flush in the bulkhead behind him boomed out, "All cadets report immediately to the briefing room for combat analysis!" that he was able to pull himself together enough to shuffle wearily over to join his fellows for the march down to the great hall in the belly of the training ship.

Talking in the ranks was strictly forbidden, but by properly focusing one's tendrils and using a minimum of power it was possible to communicate to the cadet next to you without the platoon leader being aware of it.

"How did it go today?" came a whisper from Larn's left.

"Rough. But not as bad as

yesterday. At least I didn't run."

"Which side did you draw?"

"The Blues again."

The cadet to his left let out an incautious snort that drew an angry "No talking!" from the platoon leader.

"You think you had it rough? That's a laugh. I was assigned to the Reds. We had to go up a slope in broad daylight against a crazy human who didn't know enough to lie down and die. He hammered six slugs through my gut while I still had a good twenty yards to go. One of the umpires spotted it, too. I bet I get slapped ten demerits for not making use of available cover."

"Cadet Clung!"

The cadet that had been whispering to Larn stiffened apprehensively. "Yes, sir?"

"I warned you once. Book yourself five demerits for talking in ranks."

The rest of the march was made use of available cover."

The hollow-eyed pfc stared down at the stretcher containing the unconscious form of the blond boy with something approaching awe.

"He going to make it through?"

The medical corpsman looked up from his bandaging and nodded briefly. "He'll be ready to go

home and sell bonds in a month. They're hungry for heroes state-side. He a friend of yours?"

The pfc shook his head. "I never saw him before this morning. I sure never figured him for a Congressional medal."

The cadets sat at rigid attention as the umpires' reports were read.

"...the decision of the judges in the case of Cadet Sergeant Stlarz is that his unorthodox expenditure of Red forces in a daylight raid though almost successful, was tactically unsound because of failure to employ available artillery support. Twentyfive demerits."

As one by one his fellows were censored or commended, the tension grew within Larn until he didn't see how he could stand it any longer. And then at long last his name was called.

"The case of Cadet Larn has given rise to considerable discussion. Although his defense of his position left much to be desired—the clearing of a routine jam in his weapon, for example, taking twice as long as it should have—it cannot be denied that his actions prevented the Red force from overrunning the blue positions. As a consequence, the hundred demerit penalty he incurred yesterday is hereby canceled. It was further felt, however, that Cadet

Larn did not exercise sufficient care in protecting the training device that was assigned to him for use during today's action. Five demerits."

Cadet Larn didn't mind the five demerits. Cadet Larn had been blooded and he knew he would never run again. He was already dreaming of the time when he would no longer have to use clumsy substitutes but could instead hurl his own beautifully coordinated bulk against such enemies of the Empire as were important enough to demand the attention of an officer in the Frontier Service . . .

THE pfc looked sleepily at the sky and yawned. Maybe he could get some sleep tonight for a change. After the way they'd been hurt, they should take it easy for a day or two. He leaned back, took a last drag on his cigarette, and flipped it lazily through the slot between the sandbags. As he reached over to mark up another point on the flat rock, he noticed for the first time the name scrawled a few hours before by the blond boy and the single scratch beside it.

"That guy ain't human," he said to nobody in particular. "First day up and he goes and wins himself a one-man war. Wonder what the hell ever got into him?"



Starlight Radar

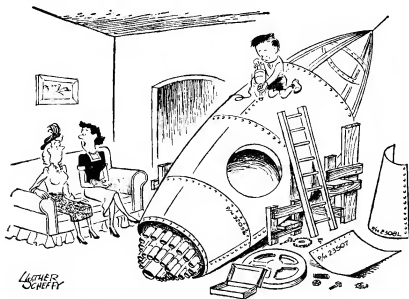


FASTEST growing of the new sciences is the little appreciated "radio astronomy." Ever since it has been learned that the stars—our Sun too!—emit radio waves, huge parabolic reflecting telescopes have been scanning and probing the sky. Day and night these instruments search the unknown for radio waves penetrate the air unlike visible light.

In the U.S., England, Australia and a half dozen other places in the world, radio telescopes, hundreds of feet in diameter are in

operation. In themselves they produce little spectacular news that can be appreciated by the layman. But to trained scientific eyes they are unfolding a new dimension. The secrets of atomic nuclei on which further progress in atomic physics hinges, lie in the atomic bombs which are the stars. Radio waves of the stellar kind are informative suppliers of knowledge.

With the telescope and spectroscope now aided and abetted by the stellar radar, physics and astronomy know no limits.



"It's those breakfast serials—he's been saving boxtops!"



Conducted by Mari Wolf

PERIODICALLY some fan blasts off in a fanzine about the general low intelligence, immaturity, or just plain neurosis of fans in general. Following his article, there are rebuttals by other fans, proving or attempting to prove that fans are neither stupid, childish, or crazy. (As for what motivated the original debunker to enter fandom in the first place—well, that's usually left unsaid.)

Now, I can't help feeling that all the furor is somewhat beside the point. Some fans *are* stupid; I've met a few who couldn't follow any logical connection between a premise and a conclusion. Some fans are highly intelligent but a bit bizarre, to say the least, in their personal lives. Most, though, carry no label "Fan" to distinguish them from the general population; they're fairly normal people, often but not necessarily young, who like

to keep in touch with other people of similar, and fannish interests.

Many fans are immature. Many fans are also of high school age, experimenting with writing and publishing and artwork by putting out their own fanzines. So why should they act like senior citizens?

In the Tucker fan survey one of the questions was, "Do you think fans are more intelligent than the average?" To this one, I'd answer yes. Not because fans in general are great brains (though some take great pleasure in believing themselves so) but because just about everyone who voluntarily joins a special interest club or group is probably of above *average* intelligence. Be he a rock collector, a bird watcher, or a science fiction fan, he's at least smart enough to have an interest outside of the sphere of activities necessary for

his bread and butter and keeping up with the Joneses. And when the interest in question concerns the ability to read (without even taking into account the ability to write, draw, or struggle with a recalcitrant mimeo) then I'd say the people with that interest are, in general, pretty intelligent. (How large a percentage of the population reads at all, except maybe the funnies?)

The science fiction fan is hard to describe. Often, he's a fan without the science fiction, which he gave up reading some time ago in order to have more time for his fanzines and his voluminous letter writing. He may be humorous or axe grinding or just plain dull, but he has quite definite ideas as to what the future may be like. He won't commit himself; he's quite well versed on probabilities and the Heisenberg uncertainty principle (though he may not know it by name) and he can usually come up with a fairly concrete set of alternative worlds for the far future. In the near future he's less concrete. He may be concerned about the inevitability of atomic war, or he may believe that the flying saucers will land and solve all our problems.

The science fiction fan and writer have changed over the last few decades. No longer are they engaged in remaking the world—and the universe—for man; now in many stories they're remaking man. (Not a new theme certainly; probably older than the other.) But exalt it or deplore it, the science fiction fan isn't indifferent to the machine age in which he lives.

He's aware of rockets in a way that most people aren't, for instance. The general public may, after the recent rush of articles in national circulation slicks, accept the coming of space stations and rockets to the Moon, but how many care to find out what space is like. (The other day I was talking to a man who happens to be a movie producer interested in science fiction, and he asked, not in these exact words but asked nonetheless, "Just what do rockets push against when there isn't any air?")

THE science fiction fan can see, at least partially, where today's mechanized culture may be taking him. A lot of other people just don't care. I work at a rocket lab. Few of the people I work with are even slightly interested in rockets, at least beyond the requirements of their jobs. In our part of the lab there is a lot of electronic equipment that shows the tremendous advances in the electronic field in the last few years. You see old computers, banks and banks of dials and tubes and wiring, and new computers that can do several times the work much faster and in about one tenth the space and come enclosed in soft pastel cabinets besides. The new ones are so simple that a kid out of grammar school could run one; you just push the right buttons. And to a lot of people, that's all the machine age means. Just push the buttons and tabulate the answers, and someone else, the machine perhaps, will do all the work and the thinking.

The science fiction fan doesn't

look on the machine as magic. Some people do. Once, in more credulous times, people muttered incantations, knowing that if they said the right spells they would get the desired results. Now, they don't have to remember spells. Just push the proper buttons, and what you want to happen, happens.

As a case in point, there's the old story about the South Sea people who thought disease was caused by devils. They wouldn't believe the germ theory or accept modern sanitation until some enterprising missionary let them look at bacteria through the microscope. Then they believed. They followed the missionary's health rules. Why not, wasn't he a great magician? Hadn't he actually *shown* them the devils?

You tell that story and people laugh politely at the poor ignorant savages, and yet except for a glib knowledge of 20th century terminology, do they know anything more about what happens when they push the right buttons?

The science fiction fan may not know history; his only knowledge of sociology or psychology or anthropology may come from the pages of the science fiction magazines; yet nevertheless he has a considerably better than average knowledge of the effects of our machine age upon himself and the world he lives in. And the future.

One other thing about the science fiction enthusiast, writer, reader, or active fan. In a world where literary pessimism is the accepted mode of expression he stands out strangely. All the books and stories on imminent

doom to the contrary, he's still basically an unusually optimistic person. And even the writers most decreed as being harbingers of doom are actually anything but. . .

I wonder why, in the many analyses of science fiction you'll find in the better fanzines, no one has commented on it at length. Maybe it's so obvious . . . But if you've read Sartre and Bradbury the same weekend, as I recently did, you can't help but notice the basic difference in approach. To Sartre, the realist, the world is a pretty sad place and the people are pretty sad too; his protagonists understand and accept. To Bradbury, the world may be an even sadder place; his protagonists (and everyone else) headed for total disaster—and yet, where's the acceptance? Bradbury is *not* a writer of the futility school; his heroes are heroes to the end, if not with the sword and spear of the epic, at least with that inner integrity that's much more important.

Your science fiction fan isn't a fanatic; he's not out to change the world single handed. But he isn't one to curl up and renounce his initiative and let the fates kick him around any way they want to.

Sure, he may be pretty dumb at times; his feuds may be childish; his ego may be sorely in need of deflating. But he's himself, in a group where everyone is himself, and if that's enough to condemn him as being hopelessly immature—well, then I hope I never grow up either.

* * *

This time there are lots of good

fanzines, many more high caliber ones than usual. I don't suppose the high level is due to a sudden fanzine boom; it's probably just coincidence that there are so many zines this time that are hard to find much fault with.

* * *

PSYCHOTIC: 20c; Dick Geis, 2631 N. Mississippi St., Portland 12, Oregon. Geis has finally realized his true worth. The price of his zine has risen 100%! It sounds better to put it that way rather than to say it went from a dime to twenty cents.

It's easily worth it though. Psychotic's last page would be page number 52 if Geis numbered them. (Of course it's still page 52, only you have to count them to find this out.)

The scoop of this issue is a bit (in the sense of the past tense of bite) which must have been titled by Geis, "The Incident Revisited" by Evelyn . . . er Harlan Ellison. This gives the "other" side of the story of the century. These boys play rough.

The fact that Geis didn't go to the Frisco still bothers me. He gave some weak excuse like being unable to find a ride or not knowing anyone to water his hemp plants or something. As some mystery detective or other says (with dialect), "this leads one furiously to think." I think that Geis is a hoax. That some fan has created this character to voice his opinions. After careful analysis, it must be someone like Walt Liebscher. Who else would keep plugging this "It rhymes with vice" line?

Oh well, at 20 cents, this is a

cheap vice . . .

Rating: 1

* * *

HYPHEN: 2/25c; Walt Willis, 170 Upper Newtownards Rd., Belfast, N. Ireland. This issue contains one of the funniest things I have read. It's a Bill Temple account of a British Rocket Society meeting. It sounds like the play "You Can't Take It with You," with rocket fuel being tested in a kitchen oven and sky rockets fired in the living room. Being a member of a rocket society, I can sympathize with the test conditions.

A rather humorous article is reprinted, in toto, in "Toto", the reprint section. (I've been waiting for a chance to use that line.)

And of course, there are oodles of letters.

Rating: 1

* * *

EISFA: 5c; monthly; Robert and Juanita Coulson, 823 Etna Ave., Huntington, Indiana. This fanzine, put out by the Eastern Indiana Science Fiction Association, costs you 50c a year; if you want to join the Indiana STF league you can do so for another 50c. If you live thereabouts, I'd recommend looking into the club.

In this issue Thomas Stratton writes a take-off on the Shaver Mystery, "I Remember Yucca Flats!" Stratton depends on footnotes to carry most of his humor; to me, anyway, the constant looking down at the bottom of the page and then back to the text is more distracting than amusing.

There's a rather good collection of "STFinitions," mostly puns - like Stratton's *Satellite*, for eques-

trianism after dark, and De Weese's *Android*, helped Ann with the dishes . . .

Meeting notices, other short fiction, articles, a short poem by Edgar Allen Pogo and other items complete the issue. Eisfa could be improved (mimeoing especially is a bit ragged) but for a nickel, who's complaining?

Rating: 2

* * *

ALPHA: 60c a year in mint U. S. stamps; bimonthly; Dave Vendelmans, 130, Strydchof Ave., Berchem, Belgium. Vendelmans and Jan Jansen put out this one, which gets better and funnier all the time. There's more on the "Twerpcon" - the Antwerp STF convention, that is. May *Alpha* put one on each year, and to heck with all other and more tangible con reports.

Also there's Vince Clarke on the Twerpcon, with interlineations; a book review, in French, of Francis Carsac's novel, "Ceux do Nulle Part," (Those From Nowhere, if your dictionary isn't handy): another Adam and Eve story by Dale Graham; and a long letter section. It's the kind of letter section you turn to first, and why not, with Bob Bloch leading off?

The 60c a year includes membership in the Alpha fanclub. At a dime a copy, you just can't miss.

Rating: 3

* * *

DESTINY: 35c; quarterly; Earl Kemp, 3508 N. Sheffield Ave., Chicago 13, Illinois, or Malcolm Willits, 11848 S. E. Powell Blvd., Portland 66, Oregon. I don't know how much money editors Willits

and Kemp put into this beautiful zine, but it must be quite a lot. And they donate a lot of time to it too.

The photo-offset reproduction does justice to the art work, from cover to cover. (Front cover - Chesley Bonestell; back cover, Hannes Bok!) Plus, in the special issue I have here, the *Destiny* Portfolio of Amateur Fantasy Art. You'll find familiar and unfamiliar names and styles among the ten artists included here.

To me, though, one work stood out - Pvt. Bernard Zuber's. I only wish the page it's on were large enough to frame . . . More of his work is upcoming in future issues of *Destiny* too.

Also in this issue Philip Jose Farmer writes on the world of the Oz stories in "The Tin Woodman Slams the Door." And there are stories, by among others, Frank M. Robinson, Robert Bloch, and Fritz Leiber. And a very good poem by Dick Geis.

Expensive, but worth it.

Rating: 3

* * *

DESTINY FANTASY INDEX: 1953: 35c; Editors and publishing address same as in the *Destiny* review above. The *Index* recapitulates the science fiction and fantasy of '53 - listing all the stories in all the stf magazines, and all the books in the genre published that year.

There's also Edward Wood's "White Paper: 1953-1954" on the state of the science fiction market. Plus graphs on sales, numbers of magazines published over the years that stf has been a definite field.

Invaluable to collectors.

Rating: 3

* * *

CANADIAN FANDOM: 15c; Gerald Steward, 166 McRoberts Ave., Toronto 10, Ontario, Canada. This zine, in its 12th year of publication now, is one of the best examples you'll find of a good, all around fanzine. It doesn't specialize in humor, axe grinding, or being seriously constructive; it doesn't have the one man stamp that a zine like Psychotic has.

It has, in this issue, Bill Stavdal's "In Defense of 'Mad'" and Howard Lyon's new contest, "I Hate 'Mad' Because . . ." Contest prizes are copies of 'Mad.' The Contest is apparently on the level.

There's Ron Kidder's record review of "Don Juan in Hell"—strange to find it in a fanzine, but it's well done and fits in just fine. There's a story by Leslie Crouch, columns, and Don Ford's "Indian Lake Story." Plus an inserted sheet from an unnamed crudzine - put in to show you just how bad a fanzine can get if it doesn't try.

Rating: 3

* * *

FIE: 15c; quarterly; Harry Calneck, Granville Ferry, Nova Scotia, Canada. Howard Lyons in "I Was a Fan for the F.B.I." gives still another report on the Midwestcon - complete with allusions. The most entertaining of these reports. (Later on, according to the editor's note, Howard and Boyd Raeburn were in a wreck, which did a lot of damage to Boyd's MG and apparently quite a lot of damage to Boyd and Howard themselves. I

know how they must feel . . . last month, while we were riding in a new Jaguar I'd owned for just one week a fellow drove through a stop sign at about 45 mph and plowed into it. "Oh, it's all right," his wife says, "We have insurance ...")

Georgiana Ellis writes on fans and their reasons for being in fandom. Sort of a rebuttal to Rich Elsberry, who apparently called fans stupid.

Then there's Gerald A. Steward's fanzine review column, "The Gas Pipe," where he really blasts some of the crudzines. Some of his reviews are much more fun to read than what he's reviewing.

Rating: 5

* * *

FANTASY-TIMES: 10c; twice a month; James V. Taurasi, 137-03 32nd. Ave., Flushing 54, N. Y. The newspaper of science fiction, now in its thirteenth year, keeps going — though there has been a definite publication lag somewhere! The dates on the masthead are way behind times, such as the issue giving Convention reports having its articles datelined September 3rd, 4th, 5th, and its masthead stating 2nd August.

Still, rightly dated or not, it brings you the news of the stiff-fantasy world. But it's slimmer now than it used to be.

Rating: 4

* * *

TRIODE: 10c; US representative Dale R. Smith, 3001 Kyle Ave., Minneapolis, Minn. Eric Benccliffe edits this new zine from Cheshire, England. It starts out fine. There's no need to excuse it as being just a first issue, one that's bound to

improve. Probably it will improve, but it's your dime's worth right now.

One of the funniest bits of fan-nish humor I've seen recently is tucked away in the back - Phyllis Economou's "Behind Bars," or what happens when she sends U.S. currency to Bentcliffe for a subscription to *Triode*. Did you know that Gaol is English for Jail?

There are also Walt Willis and Vince Clarke - enjoyable reading.

Rating: 3

* * *

KAYMAR: 10c or 3 for 25c; monthly; K. Martin Carlson; 1028 3rd Ave. So., Moorhead, Minn. The *Kaymar Trader* is the place to pick up bargains and scarce items for your science fiction or fantasy collection. Here you'll find listed for sale everything from the Tarzan books to *Unknown*, A. Merritt to the *Argosy* stories of the twenties and thirties. Plus, of course, all current magazines and books.

The zine is strictly a trading medium; if you have nothing to buy, sell, or swap you won't be interested. But if you're on the lookout for hard to come by science fiction, fantasy or weird books or magazines, here's a good place to start looking.

Rating: 3

* * *

STARLANES: 40c; quarterly;

Orma McCormick, 1558 W. Hazelhurst St., Ferndale 20, Mich. *Starlanes*, the International Quarterly of Science Fiction Poetry, is a very good looking publication, printed, rather slim - but containing some of the best verse in the sf, fantasy, and weird field.

You can't judge anything of as specialized a nature as this by the same criteria you'd apply to a general interest fanzine. *Starlanes* is for those who like poetry and sf; if you like it you'll want to subscribe; if you don't like sf-poetry you won't want it at all.

Contents are spotty, ranging from overwritten flights of lyricism to limericks. In this issue I liked especially a couple of the shorter poems - Arcturus' "War," and Beulah Fenderson Smith's "Say."

Also, there's listing of the top rated poetry from the previous issue, if you like to keep score.

Rating: 5

* * *

That's all for this time. Hope the next mailing has as many good ones as this - I had a lot of fun reading these. Remember, if you have a fanzine you want reviewed just send it to me, Mari Wolf, Pandora's Box, IMAGINATION, P. O. Box 230, Evanston, Illinois.

See you next month . .

—Mari Wolf

You've Been Missing Something

if you haven't been reading our companion magazine, **IMAGINATIVE TALES**. The March issue (now on sale) features a hilarious novel by Robert Bloch, one of science-fantasy's most popular writers. And so you'll know what to look for, turn to page 131 for a tempting tantalizer!



Appetizing Algae



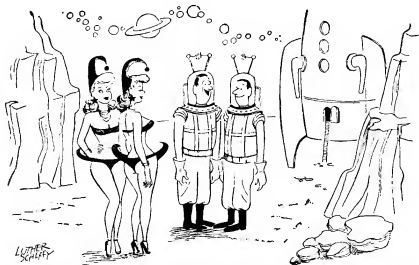
The age old dream of synthetic food factories has been a reality for some time. Now it's only a question of applying the facts.

Algae, usually seen as a greenish scum on stagnant pools, are minuscule plants capable of reproducing themselves on a vast scale. Because they are almost fifty per cent pure protein, biologists have known for a long time that they could be used as a nutritious food. Numerous researchers are using artificial media in huge tanks, to cultivate the algae. By suitable processing, the algae can be incorporated into a palatable food, a

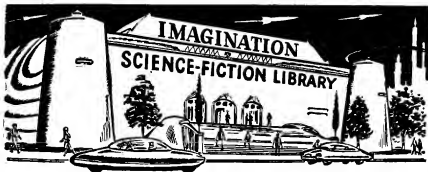
fact which some day may mean a lot to a world which is rapidly outgrowing its food supply.

Animal fodder of high quality can be obtained by the neat expedient of converting sewage to algae. The sewage is used up completely and the resultant algae is so pure, that except for the psychological factor, it could be used for human consumption.

About the only problem still remaining for the food synthesists, is the need for making the algae tasty as well as nutritious—not an easy task. How will you have your algae steak—rare?



"If 'FXGRNS' means what I think it does we're in for a lively weekend!"



— REVIEWING CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION BOOKS —

Conducted by Henry Bott

Hard cover science fiction is booming and many fine novels and anthologies are available at all bookstores or by writing direct to the publishers. Each month IMAGINATION will review several titles—candidly—as a guide to your book purchases.

THE SCIENCE FICTION SUBTREASURY

by Wilson Tucker, 240 pages, \$2.75, Rinehart & Company, Inc. New York City.

It has been an anthology year in the science fiction world—and still they keep coming! Fortunately, this unpretentious effort of collecting ten generally good stories by that whimsical aficionado and sterling writer, comes off rather well. Wilson has neatly succeeded in overcoming the pompous even in his most serious efforts.

"The Street Walker" the first neat divertisement of the lot, is a grim satire on the City choking itself to death—and to another kind of life! The O. Henry ending is neither tired nor labored and the result is a good story.

There is no point in outlining the

remaining nine stories. They're humorous, satirically and altogether entertaining. One word—the fourth story, "Home Is Where the Wreck Is," concerning the singularly inept space pilot who couldn't hit the Earth if he fell from his ship—this is *really* good. Especially after a fare of space pilots straight from the annals of television's Captain Video!

Tucker has the light touch—not the silly one—and though once or twice he descends to the shaggy dog type of thing, the most of this book is first rate.

As is so often the case with the writer who understands humor, Tucker has kindness and a compelling sympathy for human beings and their predicaments.

Letters from the Readers

"EDITORS CHOICE" PROTEST

Dear Bill:

In the August 1954 issue of *Madge* in reply to a letter by John Courtois, you made some statements concerning THE EDITORS CHOICE IN SCIENCE FICTION, an anthology which I compiled, and I hope you will be fair enough to print this reply.

THE EDITORS CHOICE IN SCIENCE FICTION asked twelve science fiction magazine editors, including some of the magazines no longer being published, to select a story which they considered outstanding and which had never previously been anthologized.

Originally Donald A. Wollheim was to have edited this book, but for personal reasons abandoned it. He had obtained some selections, prior to his break with McBride Publishers, so as a matter of simple publishing ethics, the publishers decided not to duplicate any selections he had obtained. There was very little time before the book

went to press, so I hastily wrote you asking for a selection. Due to the closeness of the deadline, I suggested a story to you, remembering you had spoken warmly of it during a dinner conversation we had at the Philadelphia Convention.

Your reply reached me, after a gap of about 14 days from the date of writing. In your letter you stated that the only story you would consider was PATROL by Richard H. Nelson (October '52 *Madge*). This was the same story you gave to Wollheim, so therefore ethically we could not use it. Due to the lapse in your reply, I found myself with the press-time 48 hours off. There was no time to contact you again for an alternative selection, so with considerable difficulty we substituted another local magazine at the last moment.

Therefore, it is unfair to claim that IMAGINATION was not considered or was discriminated against because you made a selection we did not agree with. We did consider IMAGINATION. Due to

publishing deadlines which you should be all-too-familiar with, we were forced to do without a selection from *Madge*.

Your concluding statement read: "So don't take an anthology too literally as to its literary value." That is particularly unfair, since at the time you made it the book was not yet out and you had no earthly way of knowing its literary quality. Personally, I believe the editors in their various selections unearthed a real harvest of scientific-fictional nuggets, and from a broad variety of sources. Even our severest critics have found a good deal to praise in the literary standards of the stories in the volume.

In the November 1954 issue of *Madge* you published a letter from Donald A. Thompson. Mr. Thompson is a fabricator of the first water when he strongly intimates that H. L. Gold's magazine, *Galaxy*, was not included in the anthology because I did not agree with Gold's selection. I loved Mr. Gold's selection, and wanted to use it very much, but Fletcher Pratt had previously obtained it for an anthology of his own. Mr. Gold was unable or unwilling to make any further selection since he did not want to release any stories he was compiling for "The Second *Galaxy* Reader of Science Fiction". There is no law compelling a magazine editor to select a story if he does not want to. Regretfully I had to leave *Galaxy* out.

Editing anthologies of this sort is a tricky task. You must first get an editor to make a selection, then get the author to let you have it. Sometimes even editors are not

above unethical standards. One editor, whose selection we did not use, we strongly suspected of selecting a story printed under his own pen-name.

I hope this clears the matter up, except to say, when people fuss so hard over a book, it must have something.

Sam Moskowitz
127 Shephard Ave.
Newark 8, N. J.

Glad to print your rebuttal, Sam; however, you haven't changed our opinions as previously expressed. You make quite an issue out of a "publishing deadline" facing the book. We agree that we're certainly familiar with deadlines; with MADGE a monthly and IMAGINATIVE TALES a bi-monthly we're putting 1½ books to press every thirty days. Yet, in the case of THE EDITORS CHOICE IN SCIENCE FICTION the deadline seems to have extended from May 1953 (when Don Wollheim requested our selection) through December 1953 (when you took over the compilation and wrote us on the 23rd) up to and past July 1954—when our remarks appeared in the August Madge at which time as you point out, the book had not as yet made an appearance. While we will not argue with your "deadline", it would appear to have been hardly of a pressing nature. The publishing ethics you speak of concerning a selection given to Wollheim (for the same book) do not appear too relevant. By the very nature of this book you or Wollheim were simply compilers since the "editors" were making the choices. Regardless of who the com-

iler is, we fail to see why an editor must change his choice, if indeed he is to have one. In this regard we call to your attention the following quote from your letter of December 23, 1953: I have finally gotten the various editors up at McBride to agree on HEIR APPARENT by Alan E. Nourse from the November, 1953 issue of IMAGINATION as a story they would pass for the anthology . . . Well, Sam, we think it was damned decent of the McBride editors to make our selection for us and request a rubber stamp approval. The fact remains that we had the temerity to make a selection other than theirs and forthwith heard not a word further from you until the end of April, at which time you wrote apologizing for the fact that Madge was not being included—because of a pressing deadline! Some extended deadline! And while we're on the subject of the editors making choices—many of the stories you presented in the book as "editors' choices" were stories bought and published by editors other than those you presented . . . beside the point, perhaps, but just another facet to the belief we hold that your book was not meant to be published as a true editors' choice. While we don't know all the facts behind Galaxy's exclusion, we do know that Horace Gold is a pretty reasonable guy, and find it difficult to believe he wouldn't cooperate—if given the opportunity. As to the unknown editor you mention who selected a story you suspect was under a pen-name of his, we say, so what? If that's his choice, use it.

That may be a display of self-favoritism, but it's not a crime. Besides, the story may have been a really good one . . . Yep, Sam, when people fuss so over a book it must have something . . . or perhaps lack something. Maybe ethics, a word you're fond of in this regard . . .

ROAD TO EXTINCTION

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Most of the following remarks were originally written for COUP, the voice of fandom's left opposition.

It would seem that a majority of letters on the Space Station controversy favor U. S. A. control, which is a testament to either the effectiveness of U. S. propaganda or to the feeble-mindedness of the average *Madge* reader. My own opinion, though in the minority, might be of interest to these readers.

It would mean death for what freedom mankind has left if the Space Station were controlled by the Stalinist bureaucracy. There is little question on that score.

That would be equally true in the case of a station controlled by a capitalist state, for, even as Joe Gibson admits, "If the U. S. establishes the base first—eventually and inevitably we'd have to establish a world dictatorship."

Further, what would other nations have to say to having an American space station flying over their heads? It is analogous to sending battleships, uninvited, into their harbors; it is, in fact, comparable to an act of war.

It's ridiculous to say, "But they trust us. They know we only want peace." Will they trust the only nation that has used an atomic bomb as a weapon of war so far? Whose pigheaded and selfish foreign policy has led the world time and again to the brink of war?

A United Nations space station seems to be the best bet. For every man of a Stalinist satellite there could be one from a nation dominated by Wall Street, and another from a country whose interests would lie in seeing that neither of the other two assumed control of the station.

That's what I think. You seem to think the following: I quote: "It is dangerous to think too freely." Dangerous, to whom? The thinker, obviously. Danger from whom? A thought police? Shades of 1984! You seem to be passionately fond of freedom, except in word or deed . . . or thought.

Again, to quote you: "All the idealistic thinking you can muster won't solve these problems." Exactly what do you think will solve these problems?

Again, to quote you: "We're enemies. Enemies fight. When they do, only one survives." This Neanderthal statement is a curious idea for a leading editor, supposedly an intelligent man. Suppose your notion gained acceptance, and that the U. S. A., singlehanded, puts up a space station, staffs it with Hamlings under the command of Lieutenant-General Hamling. "Duh-enemies—Fight, duh—" And the Soviet Union gets flattened.

Suppose that the inevitable reprisal, (inevitable whether the USSR

is finished off or not) does not, by unbelievable luck, destroy the U. S. Our "enemies" are dead and we're not. Loud cheers from the Know-Nothings and America-Firsters, and peace, of a sort, reigns supreme.

Or does it? There are other countries in the world, and not all of them have economic and political systems acceptable to the U. S. Naturally, none of them would attack us at once. But the plotting and the figuring would begin. Not a single citizen of any foreign nation would feel really secure from us, and what you fear, you come to hate. The first result then, would be that the U. S. would become the most hated nation in the world, hated with a generous unanimity by Socialist, Tory, Moslem, and Sikh. With a few Eskimos thrown in for good measure.

The second result would be that the Colonels and the Generals would begin to think of other uses for the power in their hands. Are you, Mr. Hamling, so sure that the government of the U. S. will always be mindful of the needs and wishes of the American people? Particularly if that government has such powers as a Space Station could give?

In the end, the nation would fall; the space station would fall; possibly the planet itself would crumble under the blast. There would be no "stepping stones" to the stars, no astronomical labs, no advances in science gained in outer space. And the nation that had made the error of choosing security above all else would find the deepest and most lasting security of all, in ex-

tion.

Dan Curran
784 Amsterdam Ave.
New York, N. Y.

We're interested in your views on the space station because they represent a particularly stupid and hysterical type of thinking currently in vogue—even in this country. You speak of a capitalist state—and Wall Street—in reference to the U. S. as if it were some sort of plague about to destroy the world. It's interesting to note that this capitalist state—and Wall Street—have been footing most of the world's bills for quite a stretch now, and remain the only bulwark against "Thought Police" and abject physical slavery. You ask us what we think will solve the prob-

lems. We refer you to our editorial in the February 1954 issue where we covered the subject in some detail. We could go into a detailed socio-political argument with you, but basically this contradicts the purpose of the space station discussion as started in these pages. The Space Station is generally assumed to be the first step man will take toward interplanetary travel. Our contention is simply that to insure this—without its being used first as a weapon to subjugate the nations of this planet—the U. S. should take the fore and establish one ahead of the Communists. Theirs is a path of aggression—inherent in the tenets of their doctrine—ours is not. United Nations control would be a step toward

"With God . . .

all things are possible!"

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handing the station to Russia and possibly handing over the Earth at the same time. Your raving that our government is leading the world to the brink of war and therefore is not a fit custodian of so great a trust is the kind of propaganda emanating from Moscow. Just keep this thought in mind: various leaks from behind the Iron Curtain have intimated that the Communist world is not only studying space travel, but doing something about it. If they beat us to the outer atmosphere you can count on the extinction you mention. In the meantime, all us loyal Lieutenant-Generals will beat the editorial drum loudly, knowing that a U. S. trek to the stars will not be a death march . . . Da? with

WALK THE "PLANK"

Dear Mr. Hamling:

In regard to your editorial in the December issue of *Madge*.

I have long wondered what was wrong with me! Now I know. According to Mr. Robert Plank, those who read science fiction are appeasing "their own psychic traumas . . ." If we who read science fiction are to be so classified then we have some comfort in the realization that we are not alone. In San Francisco, at the World Science Fiction Convention last fall, I had the pleasure of meeting many others afflicted with "schizophrenic manifestations".

One thought remained in my mind as I read the editorial: one hundred years ago my great-grandfather would have thought it impossible that a descendant of his

should be able to fly from San Francisco to New York in less than eight hours . . . In truth, he would have thought the very fact of the flight impossible. Is it so impossible then (to Mr. Plank's thinking) that my great-grandchildren or others of their generation should live in an era when what we consider fiction today will be the truth of their age? I hardly think so.

Mr. Plank should take his name, place it carefully over the railing of a ship in mid-ocean, and proceed to walk off it.

Anna E. Bidgood
730 O'Farrell St.
San Francisco, Cal.

Don't credit your great-grandchildren with all the good fortune, Anna; you'll live to see a few marvels come to pass. And space flight will head the list. In the meantime, have pity on poor old Plank. Remember the classic squelch: "Forever they praise the inferior, having never known the good!" . . with

THE GENTLEMAN'S A COW

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Did you say something about having a cow? Take a look at the signature tacked on this letter. And it's not a pun, either.

To be frank, I didn't think the December issue was up to par. The best story in the issue was THE VEGANS WERE CURIOUS. And that because of the delicious pun at the end!

Mari Wolf's column was exceptionally good. My hat's off to that fair lady.

In answer to Paula Friedman

in the letter section that **THE BATTLE OF THE BELLS** was disgusting and juvenile, I'll go along with you, ed. It WAS a delightful fantasy.

One last word: McCauley's cover (first of the "new look" series) was darned good! One thing, tho. That was rather an old-fashioned fireplug for the 21st Century. However, the gal was certainly up to date!

By the way, **IMAGINATIVE TALES** is terrific!

Jon D. Holstine
Box 36
Kingman, Ind.

Glad you like our new look on the front cover, Jon. We've really stolen a march on the entire field with this series. We have a hunch

we're setting a new standard for the years to come—if we're slightly enthusiastic, it's only because you readers have deluged us with letters of approval. And speaking of this new look on science fiction magazines, how about the McCauley cover this month? Lets hear from you

STICK BY BOTT!

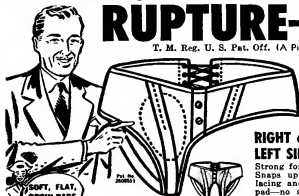
Dear Mr. Hamling:

A four part serial you're going to publish? Evidently it didn't occur to you that the great majority of your readers don't like serials. Any magazine that runs material that the readers don't like and have stated their dislike of, well, that magazine probably won't

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be around long.

Also, I have another beef. What happened to the old *Madge*? Can it be that she thinks that since she's grown up she can forget those small but vital factors that helped her to the top of the stf field? You have been leaving out those little things that mean a lot. For example, INTRODUCING THE AUTHOR, the back cover photos, and the word count on the contents page. I can foresee that in the future *Madge* will drop FAN-DORA'S BOX and the letter section!

Now for a bit of praise. As of now you're the best magazine on the market, in my opinion, but F&SF is breathing down your toenails. (Not because it has improved, but because you have slipped!)

And keep Henry Bott as your book reviewer! I notice he's been getting a little criticism lately, but I value his judgment and hope you'll stick by him.

Jeremy J. Millett
1446 Garden St.
Park Ridge, Ill.

About serials—readers will dislike them if the stories are no good! The current serial in Madge is not only good, it's terrific! By the time you finish part four you'll know you've read a great science fiction novel. The little touches missing? Look around, pal. And don't worry about Henry Bott, he can take care of himself. Note our editorial for this issue . . . wlv

COVER CONGRATS

Dear Bill:

Congratulations on the best cover

Madge has ever printed. I'm speaking of the December issue, naturally. Now there's a cover that deserves framing! I hope following ones with the new look will be as good or better.

I see you've got a serial coming up, and I'm glad of it. But do you have to run it in four parts? It takes too long to get the issues together before reading it!

Keep those cartoons coming—they're something no other magazine has—in comparable quantity or quality!

Don Stuefloten
RR 1, Box 722
Hemet, Cal.

The cover will keep bowling you over, Don. Run the serial in less than four parts? Man, this novel is a whopping 80,000 words! And you'll want other stories and departments, right? Not to forget those cartoons! . . . wlv

ON THIS AND THAT

Dear Bill:

I certainly liked the cover on the December issue. (Especially the principal character, and I don't mean the ant-eater-m-m-m!) I liked your previous idea of having the cover portray a story scene, but who knows—the more I look at the new type, the better I like it!

I finally figured out why this Plank character feels stf readers are nuts. The poor guy is jealous!

REVOLT OF THE OUT-WORLDS was pretty good, but I thought the best story was THE MIRACLE OF DAN O'SHAUGHNESSY. None of the yarns were bad, though. In fact, I can't re-

member *Madge* publishing a really bad story.

I was glad to see FANTASY FILM FLASHES back, but if it means cutting the book reviews, junk it.

Speaking of book reviews, how about those idiots who speak of Bott as "a low sneering, insensate critic"? I think they're pretty conceited for jumping on him simply because he doesn't agree with them. There have been times when I haven't agreed with Bott's reviews, but I do use his critiques quite a bit as a guide on books I buy. Most of the time I agree with him.

You're running a serial in four parts? Stretching a story out over two issues is ok. Three is permiss-

ible, but four! Oh, well, I hope it's as good as you say it is.

Dwight Agner

32 N. 32nd St.

Battle Creek, Mich.

If Plank would bother to open up that scientific mind of his and study science fiction he'd realize what he's been missing all these years! Glad to hear that you use Henry Bott's reviews as a guide to your book purchases. Hank's on the ball and his reviews show it. Go ahead, read the serial—it's great! . . . Which winds up shop for this month. Why not turn the page and subscribe—you'll get the next installments of the serial weeks ahead of newsstand distribution! And don't forget to buy the current issue of IMAGINATIVE TALES!

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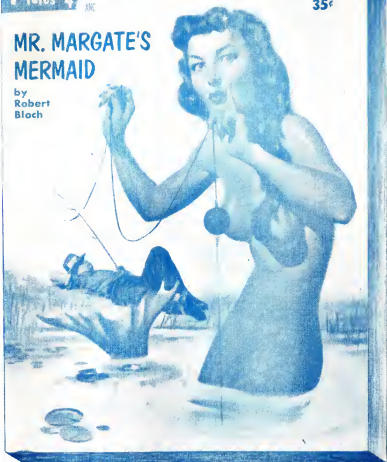
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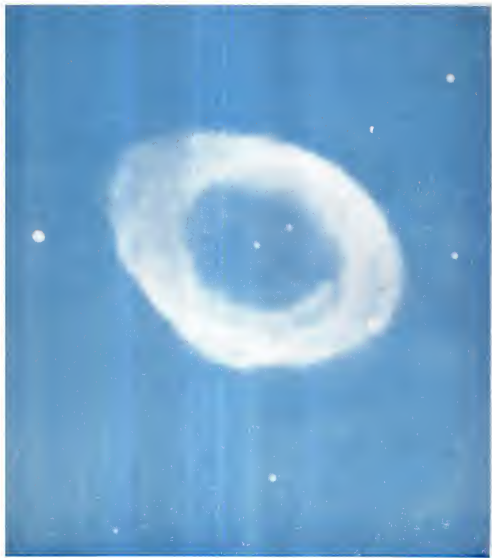
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